The Lived Experiences of Women Academic Library Deans with Workplace Networking: A Phenomenological Study

Kathy M. Irwin, PhD, Dean of University Libraries, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI

Introduction

Networking ability is an individual's capacity to build relationships with many people to leverage other people's resources, power, or influence (Ferris et al., 2005). **Workplace networks** influence an individual's access to information, resources, and assistance (Ferris et al., 2005; Ibarra, 1997; Postma, 2020).

However:
- Men and women develop and use workplace networks differently (Bierema, 2005; Ibarra, 1997; Woehler et al., 2021).
- In higher education, men outnumber women in senior leadership roles (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

Research Questions

1. What is the lived experience of women library deans with workplace networking?
   a. How do women library deans' social identities affect their experiences with workplace networking?
   b. How does the context affect women library deans' experiences with workplace networking?
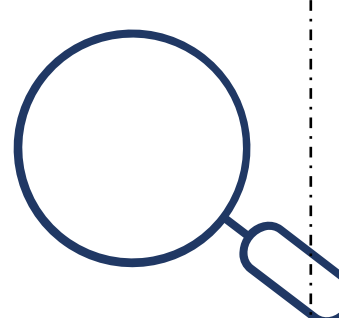
Methodology

Phenomenology (van Manen, 2016; Vagle, 2018) IRB exemption, #2021-1792
1. Population: women library deans at U.S. public R2 institutions
2. Email invitation, volunteer and consent form
3. Semi-structured interview protocol
4. Interviewed 12 participants virtually, 1-2 hours each
5. Whole-Parts-Whole data analysis

Overall Findings

- Collaborated for Institutional and Professional Success
  - Strategic alliances
  - Informal networks
  - Support networks
- Developed a Broad Perspective
- Access to information, resources, and support
- Aligned with the University's Mission
- Used networks to understand university and promote the library's role in the university's mission
- Felt Proud of Accomplishments
- Demonstrated evidence of political skills and use of power and influence

Findings – Influence of Context

- Organizational structure, culture, politics
- Library's position within the university
- Faculty status or tenure eligibility
- Teaching and research experience
- Impact of COVID-19 on meetings, chance encounters, and onboarding

Findings – Influence of Social Identities

Professional Identity

"I think in libraries, sometimes we have a bit of an inferiority complex and when we're working with faculty... sometimes feel like we're not quite good enough to speak up." Michelle

Molly described the library dean as "not an equal" with the other deans and as a "baby dean" or a "second-class citizen."

Brook reflected that not being a college dean has had a more significant impact on her workplace networking experiences than her gender. At her institution, the dean of the graduate school is a man, and she has viewed them both as "second-tier deans."

Age or Personality

Aleisha asserted that "most university faculty and administrators would tend toward the introvert side of the spectrum, so it probably aids in networking to be similar." She did not believe that her introversion had adversely impacted her workplace networking experiences.

"I think a lot of it is age. I mean, I'm a good decade younger than a lot of my colleagues, and so, the generational context is kind of different." Michelle

Race or Ethnicity

Sometimes, Micah has felt as though she needs to be the "Hispanic welcome wagon" for her university. "Nobody else does that. So, if we hire a new faculty member, I'm the one that calls them and tells them, you know, 'bienvenidos and felicidades, we're so happy you're here.' Or make sure that they have Hispanic cords for their academic robes. And I'm the one that buys those... That brings me joy, but I think the institution – this is an area that they really should have already thought of."
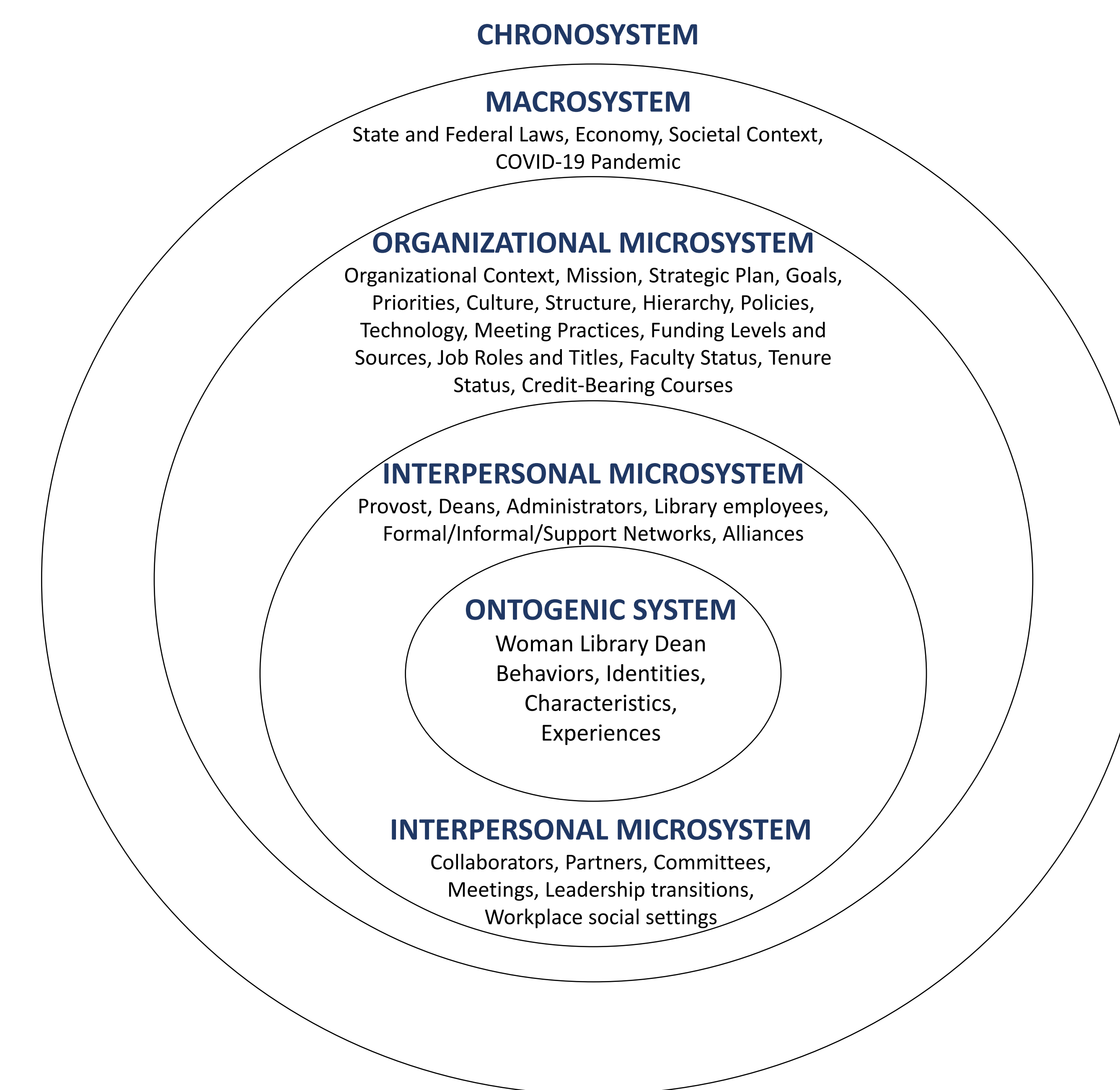
Gender

Susan observed: "I haven't really had informal networking as much with the men deans... It's a little more awkward. I have good relationships with the men deans, but some of them they just want to talk about whatever it is and then they move on, then they leave and then they're done. So, I haven't cultivated those relationships the same way I have the women leaders."

Eve observed: "With some of the male deans, I have a little bit more trouble... So, when I'm thinking about how I'm using networking to publicize the library resources and special services, sometimes I just feel like I'm just talking to a wall."

Discussion

An Ecological System of Workplace Networking
Note. This figure is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological System and Lau et al.'s (2022) Women's Career Equality Ecological System Model. The figure depicts the two-directional personal and organizational forces involved in the participants' experiences with workplace networking.

CHRONOSYSTEM

MACROSYSTEM
State and Federal Laws, Economy, Societal Context, COVID-19 Pandemic

ORGANIZATIONAL MICROSYSTEM
Organizational Context, Mission, Strategic Plan, Goals, Priorities, Culture, Structure, Hierarchy, Policies, Technology, Meeting Practices, Funding Levels and Sources, Job Roles and Titles, Faculty Status, Tenure Status, Credit-Bearing Courses

INTERPERSONAL MICROSYSTEM
Provost, Deans, Administrators, Library employees, Formal/Informal/Support Networks, Alliances

ONTOGENIC SYSTEM
Woman Library Dean
Behaviors, Identities, Characteristics, Experiences

INTERPERSONAL MICROSYSTEM
Collaborators, Partners, Committees, Meetings, Leadership transitions, Workplace social settings

Conclusions

Strategies for women library leaders
- Map and expand existing networks
- Participate in 360-degree evaluations, role-playing, drama-based training, executive coaching, and peer-mentoring

Considerations for library degree programs and professional associations
- Include workplace networking theory and political skills theory in leadership courses and workshops

Considerations for leaders of institutions of higher education
- Conduct climate studies; cultivate a culture of inclusion and belonging; foster affinity groups, allyship, and workplace friendships

Future research recommendations
- Study different populations; follow different research methodologies, theoretical perspectives, or frameworks; Test the findings of this study using a quantitative research design

Selected References

- Bierema, L. (2005). Women's networks: A career development intervention or impediment? *Human Resource Development International, 8*(2), 207 – 224. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678860500100517
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Harvard University Press.
- Ferris, G. R., Davidson, S. L., & Perrewé, P. L. (2005). *Political skill at work: Impact on work effectiveness.* Davies-Black.
- Ibarra, H. (1997). Paving an alternative route: Gender differences in managerial networks. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 60*(1), 91-102. https://doi.org/10.2307/2787014
- Irwin, K. M. (2021). Characteristics influencing academic librarian's political skills: Keys to organizational effectiveness and career success. *Journal of Library Administration, 61*(2), 207-230. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1853471
- Irwin, K. M. (2022). *The lived experiences of women academic library deans with workplace networking: A phenomenological study.* [Doctoral dissertation, Central Michigan University].
- Lau, V. W., Scott, V. L., Warren, M. A., Bligh, M. C. (2022). Moving from problems to solutions: A review of gender equality interventions at work using an ecological systems approach. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2654
- Postma, N. (2020). *If you don't do politics, politics will do you… A guide to navigating office politics effective and ethically [And yes, it is possible].* KR Publishing.
- Vagle, M. D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Woehler, M. L., Cullen-Lester, K. L., Porter, C. M., & Frear, K. A. (2021). Whether, how, and why networks influence men's and women's career success: Review and research agenda. *Journal of Management, 47*(1), 207-236. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320960529

Access poster online https://tinyurl.com/wdwpn