

# The Experiences of Women in Higher Education: Who Knew There Wasn't a Sisterhood?

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## Abstract

*The relationship challenges faced by women in leadership ranks within the academy are rarely researched. There is a dearth of research that explores the relationships between women in higher education settings and their colleagues, along with their ability to ascend to roles of leadership. Women have become well prepared to compete in the academy. However, many women in leadership roles in academia are not prepared for the lack of support and comradery from female colleagues. Using the personal stories of 34 female academic leaders, this research explores common experiences of relational aggression, perceived causes of these episodes, along with their perceptions of relationships with female colleagues in their respective institutions.*

**Keywords:** relational aggression, higher education, queen bees, mean girls, sisterhood

## INTRODUCTION

The number of women in the academy is on the rise. According to the *2010 Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession* published by the American Association of University Professors [AAUP], there is an increase of women who are tenured or on tenure track in higher education. Despite the increase, Williams (2004) documents the lack of progress they make once in higher education. A commonly noted roadblock to the upper ranks of leadership in higher education administration is the inability to shatter the glass ceiling (Washington, 2010). As the old male-dominated workplace has slowly begun to transform, Fortune 500 companies and government agencies had hoped that the rise of female leaders would create a gentler kind of office, based on communication, team building and personal development. But instead, some women are finding their professional lives dominated by high school “mean girls”—women with something to prove and a precarious sense of security—often leaving aspiring women leaders asking themselves, “Where is the sisterhood?”

To this end, using the theoretical framework of relational aggression (RA), the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore episodes of relational aggression, to understand the perceived causes of these episodes, and to examine the perceptions of relationships between female colleagues in their respective institutions. Moreover, our research questions were twofold: (1) How often are women in North Carolina colleges/universities experiencing relational aggression? and (2) How did the victims respond to the episodes of RA?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although more women are attending college and earning terminal degrees (West & Curtis, 2006), they are not attaining full professorships or upper administrative positions nearly as often as men. In 2008-09 women for the first time were awarded a greater percentage of doctoral degrees (50.4%) than men (Bell, 2010; NCES, 2016). Despite this increase, university faculty and administrators still do not reflect America’s gender, racial, and class diversity (Funk, 2004). As reported by NCES (2016), in 2013 women composed 41% of all assistant, associate, and full professors in higher education institutions. Despite these encouraging numbers, women are not attaining full professorships or upper administrative position, such as president, as often as their male counterparts (Touchton, 2008).

With so few women at the highest university settings, why is it difficult for women who hold leadership positions to develop meaningful relationships with their female counterparts, and why is there not a sense of urgency to cultivate and maintain sisterhood amongst other females with similar leadership aspirations? Moreover, how can women who hold similar leadership aspirations diminish competitiveness or aggression and support their female counterparts? By drawing on Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers's (2015) research on the "queen bee" phenomena and Funk's 2000 relational aggression study, the review of literature contends women in leadership positions in the academy demonstrate behaviors that prevent the development of a sisterhood of comradery and support where all women can advance the leadership ladder in the academy.

The queen bee syndrome, first coined in the 1970s by researchers Staines, Tavis, and Jayaratne (1974), refers to the apparent tendency of token women in senior organizational positions to dissociate from members of their own gender and block other women's ascension in organizations. Derks et al. furthered the Staines et al. 1970 assertion by indicating (1) the queen bee behavior is a response to the discrimination and social identity threat that women may experience in male-dominated organizations, and (2) queen bee behavior is not a typically feminine response but part of a general self-group distancing response also found in other marginalized groups.

Despite this early research, the queen bee syndrome still thrives four decades later, continuing to be problematic for the women who aspire to academic leadership positions. This new generation of queen bees is no less determined to secure and maintain their hard-won places as alpha females. Nevertheless, further investigations of RA may yield a better assessment of whether the types of difficulties often associated with women by the media and popular culture are a more general fact of life faced by women in various organizational contexts (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013).

Far from nurturing the growth of younger female talent, queen bees push aside possible competitors by chipping away at their self-confidence or undermining their professional standing (Derks et al., 2011). It is a trend undergirded by irony: the very women who have complained for decades about unequal treatment from men now perpetuate many of the same problems by turning on other female colleagues. Findings from the *2014 Workplace Bully Institute Survey* (Namie, 2014) demonstrate that while there are fewer female perpetrators (females engaged in bullying behaviors) than male perpetrators (males engaged in bullying behaviors), female perpetrators target their female counterparts more: at a rate of 68% (Table 1). Table 1 provides the rate of male versus female perpetrators and the rate each gender group targets males and females.

Table 1: *Gender and the Bullying Experience in 2014*

Male Perpetrators	59 %
Male Perpetrators: Female Targets	57 %
Male Perpetrators: Male Targets	43 %
Female Perpetrators	31 %
Female Perpetrators: Female Targets	68 %
Female Perpetrators: Male Targets	32 %
Female Targets	60 %
Male Targets	40 %

### Understanding Relational Aggression

Described as any behavior intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships with others (Grotzinger & Crick, 1996), relational aggression or relational aggressive behaviors can be seen in female power struggles and encompass a range of emotionally hurtful behaviors (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). Theorists have argued that relational aggression is more prevalent in girls because they place a high value on friendships and mutually shared qualities (Apter & Josselson, 1998). Nilan (1991) describes girls' same-sex friendships as requiring a collectively agreed-upon moral order that includes caring, trust, and loyalty; girls who do not exhibit such qualities are at risk of exclusion from the group. When girls do not conform to the moral order, socially aggressive behaviors such as gossiping (Laird, 2003), social exclusion, social isolation, social alienation, and stealing friends or romantic partners often ensue (Crothers et al., 2009). These adolescent behavioral patterns often continue into adulthood (Sprecher, 2008).

Unlike other types of bullying, relational aggression is not as overt or noticeable as physical aggression. However, the effects can be long lasting. Namie's (2014) research, conducted at the Workplace Bullying Institute, indicates that women bullies choose women targets 68% of the time. Namie's study further revealed that 56% of perpetrators of relational aggressive behaviors were bosses; while 33% were peers or same level associates.

Both boys and girls intend to inflict harm, but there are differences in how they express these feelings (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Females tend to use more covert forms of aggression to express their anger (Arora & Stanley, 1998). The use of

confrontational strategies to achieve interpersonal damage, including deliberately ignoring someone, threatening to withdraw emotional support or friendship, and excluding someone from a group by informing her that she is not welcome are classic examples of covert forms of aggression (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). A few examples prominent in higher education settings are: blaming others for their problems rather than taking responsibility for actions, manipulating email communications to make oneself look good, taking credit for work completed by colleagues or students, dominating discussions within departmental or faculty meetings. (Thayer-Bacon, 2011).

Women in higher education, although increasing in numbers, experience difficulties in building and maintaining positive relationships with female colleagues. Experiences of RA or professional hazing serve as an underlying factor of this difficulty. Current literature does not include personal stories of women leaders in the academy who have experienced relational aggressive behaviors by their female counterparts and coping mechanisms employed. This study adds to the current body of knowledge by examining the relationships among women in the academy and providing a venue for RA victims to share their experiences.

## METHODS

### Study Sample

The overarching goal of this study was to characterize how women in college/university settings respond to episodes of RA when encountered. Females employed either in private or public 4-year colleges/universities at the ranks of assistant, associate, professor, mid-level administration (program directors and department chairs), or in administration completed a cross-sectional survey and participated in semi-structured interviews. A convenience sample of women participating in a leadership development program in North Carolina was used to generate 51 women who completed questionnaires. Thirty-four respondents (approximately 67%) expressed having experienced relational aggressive behavior toward them. These 34 respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researchers. Nineteen of the 34 respondents agreed to be interviewed. Of the 34 respondents, 62% (n=21) had greater than 10 years of experience in higher education. The sample's racial composition was inclusive of 53% African Americans (n=18), 38% Caucasians (n=13), 3% Latino (n=1), and 3% Asian (n=1), while 3% (n=1) did not indicate race. Table 2 provides the range of ages for the study's

participants; Table 3 indicates the years of service at the subjects' respective institution along with their university responsibilities.

Table 2: *Participants' Ages*

Range of Ages	Percentages	Number of Participants (n=34)
> 50	21 %	7
41-50	47 %	16
30-40	24 %	8
Did Not Indicate	9 %	3

Table 3: *Years of Service and University Responsibilities*

University Responsibilities	Percentages	Number	Years of Service	Percentages	Number
Faculty	50	17	0-5	30	10
Department Chair	15	5	6-10	32	11
Program/Project Director	26	9	> 10	35	12
Deans/Asst. Dean	6	2	Did Not Indicate	3	1
Assistant Vice Chancellor or Vice Chancellor	3	1			
	<b>N=100</b>	<b>N=34</b>		<b>N=100</b>	<b>N=34</b>

### Research Protocols

This study was conducted in two phases: Phase 1, questionnaire deployment and Phase 2, semi-structured interviews.

#### Phase 1: Questionnaires

During Phase 1, all participants (n=51) were asked to complete a 34-item questionnaire. The first 12 questions—provided in multiple choice format—requested demographic information from each participant. The remaining 22 open-ended questions queried participants on the following categories: institutional relationships, addressed in six

questions (e.g., describe relationships between your male and female colleagues and describe the relationship with your supervisor); institutional experiences, discussed in six questions (e.g., reception upon joining your institution or departmental orientation); while professional development and leadership style were the core of the remaining 10 questions. Participants were not constrained to the space on their questionnaires for their open-ended responses. Specifically, participants' responses pertaining to institutional experiences took precedence for this study.

## **Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews**

The authors carried out semi-structured interviews either by telephone or face-to-face. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then entered into the MaxQDA software for coding and analysis. The specific interview questions used to examine participants' episodes of RA are displayed in Table 4. Study participants were asked: "Did you experience a 'hazing process' when you began your current position? If so, what did you experience and how did you handle it?" In practice, the characterizations of respondents as having experienced RA was not based on a single yes-or-no response to this question because the interviewers probed further for whether the respondent reported being hazed. Participants were not given a definition of RA prior to completing the questionnaire nor during the semi-structured interviews, but were encouraged to describe their experiences with extensive details.

Table 4: *Semi-Structured Interview Guide Questions*

1.	Did you experience a "hazing process" when you began your current position? If so, what did you experience and how did you handle it?
2.	What were the behaviors demonstrated toward you and what were your responses?
3.	Who were the aggressors?
4.	Why do you believe they were aggressive toward you?

### **Analytic Strategy**

In this phase, we used the constant comparative method, moving iteratively between codes and text to derive themes related to episodes of hazing and the participant's response. A qualitative data analyses search was conducted to describe general statements about relationships and themes present in the data. Our goal was to triangulate the relationships between episodes of RA, to examine how these episodes were handled, and what, if any, was the impact of the on the relationship between the aggressor and the participant.

Originally developed for use in the grounded theory method of Strauss & Corbin (1998), this strategy involves taking one piece of data (e.g., one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. During the process of developing themes, we focused our attention on responses to interview questions related to discussing Experiences at their Institution (Table 4). We then related themes to personal characteristics and whether the respondent described experiencing a “hazing process” and their response to the experience.

The researchers first analyzed the data through initial coding. This type of coding was chosen to examine, compare, and search for similarities and differences throughout the data, and as Charmaz (2006) contextualized, “to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data” (p. 46). The second-level coding was pattern coding. Pattern coding gave the researchers the basis to explain major themes beneath the segments of the data: patterns in human relationships, the search for causes and explanations to the possible phenomenon, and finally, the platform to construct frameworks and processes. To conclude, a triangulation of the patterns and themes created new levels for understanding the existing knowledge by reviewing the interviews in a comparative analysis with the previous two levels of coding (Saldaña, 2009).

### **Measures**

Those women who affirmed that they had experienced aggressive treatment were asked to write a brief personal account describing an incident in which they experienced relational aggression. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe a time in the past year or two when a colleague or supervisor “hurt you by either sabotaging your project, excluding you from meetings or discussion, gossiping about, saying something mean behind your back, did anything” that demonstrated behaviors of relational aggressive behaviors. Participants were also asked to include the gender of the perpetrator and the relationship to the individual. To capture their coping strategies, the researchers also asked participants to explain how they handled it and what happened after the incident. The personal narratives that the participants noted provided the data used to analyze the relationships among women in leadership in the academy.

The information provided on the written portion of the questionnaire about the episodes of aggression were coded deductively using strategies listed in the item stem as potential codes. Categories for coding included: Exclusion/Ignoring; Gossiping/Spreading Rumors; Professional Sabotage; and Taking Credit for Others’ Work. In addition to

deductive coding, the researchers allowed for inductive sub-coding and maintained a codebook to keep definitions consistent. These deductive codes were derived based upon empirical evidence that these are the most frequent forms of relational aggression in higher education settings (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Grotperter & Crick, 1996; Merten, 1997). Both researchers coded all the narratives and identified four overarching themes that manifested as patterns of responses to RA: Avoidance or Kept to myself; Focusing on the goal; Retaliation or Defiance; and Self-blame. The following findings pertain to the patterns of the participants' responses in relation to RA and not to the nature of RA itself.

## FINDINGS

After careful review of the interview transcripts, several reasons related to respondents' perceptions of why the RA behavior was directed toward them were revealed. This data is noted in Table 5.

Table 5: *RA Behaviors Demonstrated by Perpetrator*

Behaviors Demonstrated by Perpetrator	Number of Respondents (n=34)
Take over your meeting/projects; exclude from meetings, projects	4
Harassment, and personal attacks on character	5
Undermine or challenge my authority	8
Backstabbing to stop progress; providing erroneous information	5
Yelling, body language, talking down to you	9
Bullying, rude, not responding until you do something their way	3

### Themes That Emerged from Semi-Structured Interviews

Several themes emerged from careful review of the transcripts. The researchers describe four major themes selected for clinical importance. The themes relate to the participants' responses to episodes of RA. Table 6 also shows the breakdown of respondents from the interviews (n=19) related to how they responded to the RA behaviors.

Table 6: *Response to RA Behavior*

<b>Respondents' Actions</b>	<b>Number of Respondents (n=19)</b>
Avoidance or Kept to Myself	6
Focusing on the Goal	6
Retaliation or Defiance	5
Self-Blame	2

### **Avoidance or kept to myself**

Overwhelmingly, 30% of the participants acknowledged their feelings of avoidance toward the aggressor or the desire to keep to oneself in response to their episodes of relational aggression. For instance, one faculty member reported, “I had to learn things on my own...no one gave me a heads up on anything. Once I learned, then I just played the hand I was dealt, by myself.” Another faculty member opined, “Quickly, I accepted I was never going to be a part of the clique and made the best of my situation.” Another female lamented, “I didn’t have anyone who I felt comfortable in sharing my experiences, so I never told anyone.” A female leader likened her experience as, “Working here is a constant hazing process...sometimes the whole thing feels like hell. My involvement with campus and the department is limited.” Another proclaimed, “The system here is set up such that you don’t get in good with people until you do things their way. I had to learn everyone’s system to get things done.” These comments and other similar comments were the most common sentiments from participants.

### **Focusing on the goal**

Several participants indicated their current employment situation was a means or a “stop along the way” for their next position or promotion, as explained in the response, “My purpose was planned prior to my getting to this university, so I have to remain focused.” Another faculty member contended, “Hazing or not, I’ve got to remain focused and let my publications be the voice that I’ve been denied.” Yet another explained, “This experience has helped me hone my skills and is preparing me for my next position.” Focusing on the overall goal resonated with about 15% of the participants.

### **Retaliation or defiance**

Some participants disclosed their use of defiance or retaliation as the response to RA experiences. This was evidenced by the response, “I got angry and told some people off, and I let my work speak for me.” A similar comment was “No one in the department was getting articles published as quickly as me, so let them say what they want.” An

assistant vice chancellor spoke of “Being in a meeting and being told ‘You are new and you don’t know what to do. So, let me tell you.’ I addressed it, and I didn’t have to deal with things like that again.” A program coordinator made it known, “I hazed right back to let them know I could not be intimidated.” Participants demonstrating retaliation as a coping mechanism was reported by faculty members, mid-level administrators, and senior-level administrators.

### **Self-blame**

Three participants responded to their experience with self-blame. The personal narratives included comments such as, “I get in my car and unload to myself or on the phone to a trusted friend (not affiliated with the university) about how I could have handled the situation differently,” and “I believe my steps are ordered, despite being in the situation, I just need to learn how to be more of a team player.” These were the most common responses of participants who blamed themselves. One participant indicated not working to her true potential as an answer to end the aggressor’s actions.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although there is a dearth of research examining women in higher education’s experiences with RA, professional sabotage, and the lack of support from other women, our data suggest that these are important areas of exploration. Despite an increase in women as leaders in the higher education sector, women are still a minority in the academy and hold significantly fewer higher-level leadership positions. Even so, many women still see each other as competitors and may not celebrate the accomplishments of their sisters. These sentiments were echoed by the study’s participants. Surprisingly, the researchers were not expecting the reluctance of some participants to share their experiences. Concerns of reprisal were noted as the cause of such reluctance.

Results from the study support several findings of past research. The most frequently occurring behaviors identified by participants as aggressive actions parallel those defined by Funk (2000) as *horizontal violence*, often synonymously used with RA. Many of Funk’s respondents indicated that they were victims because the aggressor was threatened by their abilities or because the victim was promoted to a position that she and the aggressor were competing for. More importantly, many believed that the aggressor saw the victim as having not “paid her dues” or earned the position. The explanation of this rationale for the behavior further supports Funk’s (2004) notion that such that females and other minority groups

become angered because of their lack of power and take out their discontent on other oppressed women.

Another common reason our study participants cited for the behavior exhibited by aggressors involve the aggressor's lack of self-confidence in her abilities and job performance. This finding coincides with Dettinger and Hart's (2007) notion that aggressive behaviors by women toward other women strongly correlate with issues of self-esteem or self-worth. Our results indicate that despite experiencing episodes of RA, many participants experienced job satisfaction and maintained high ratings in the area of self-confidence in their overall job performance. This outcome, fortunately, is in direct contradiction to Dettinger and Hart's (2007) study concluding that the behaviors associated with indirect aggression often have negative ramifications on the self-confidence of the victims.

The subjects' responses offered when asked to identify the primary aggressor strongly align with Dellasega's (2005) study, in that the primary aggressors were females. Interestingly, for those who identified women as the aggressors, many participants elected to still describe their relationships with women as being collegial or situational. But the high percentage of those being hazed indicates a contradiction to the actual existence of collegial relationships with female counterparts. Participants recognized that they had experienced inappropriate behaviors, however; it can be hypothesized that their experiences were not deemed blatant enough to be categorized as extreme experiences of relational aggression. The researchers also hypothesized that participants developed social avoidance as a coping strategy and the ability to code switch when in situations of "collegial" relationships. Enduring the aggressive behaviors of female colleagues can be characterized as one of the hurdles to be crossed if the goal was to work and experience success in a predominately-male environment.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the occurrence of and responses to relational aggression for women working in higher education. The results from this study indicate that women—particularly African American women—are highly susceptible to episodes of aggression at the hands of other females. This result aligns with Easterly & Richard's (2011) assertion that unconscious bias and, at times, aggression may be attributed to why women leave the Ivory Tower. The perpetrators of these episodes vary from female colleagues to female supervisors, using a myriad of aggressive behaviors.

This study further purported to define relational aggression by indicating specific behaviors exhibited by the oppressors or aggressors, along with discussing the onset of these behaviors for women in the academia. From this study, the most commonly exhibited behaviors during episodes of RA include: attempts to sabotage professional work, the consistent undermining or challenging of authority, personal verbal attacks, negative and/or overt body language, and ongoing challenges of authority.

This research offers a reflective perspective of how RA impacts the professional relationships of women. While using the research of Laird's 2003 study as the guiding premise for how the concept of befriending may help promote collegial relationships and camaraderie, the results of this study did not corroborate that employing the befriending concepts assisted with the improvement of professional relationships with fellow female colleagues. Understandably, the study's limitation is the use of convenience sampling and the geographic location of the research; however, this study holds significance for women who aspire to ascend to leadership roles in higher education. More importantly, these women must understand that someone of the same gender does not necessarily equate to someone being an advocate.

Next, current higher education administrators (e.g. deans, associate deans and department chairs) can ascertain the importance of mentorship or support groups, as this study also confirms the need for greater explorations by feminists or women advocacy groups whose focal point is women in higher education. Moreover, more research is warranted to examine which of the themes—avoidance, focusing on the goal, retaliation or defiance, or self-blame—is the most productive and which one could be most detrimental to the successful professional trajectory of women aspiring to or currently working in higher education. Further research should also include an examination of the use of mentors for women working in the higher education arena and continued research on self-confidence and pertinent skills necessary for promotion to upper level administrative positions. Additional attention should be given to the leadership styles of women in higher education and those styles that assist women to be successful in higher education.

In sum, it is important to reexamine our assumptions and tread carefully so as not to create or exacerbate the very problem being addressed in this research. The perception that women have difficulties working with one another, regardless of whether based on fact or fiction, could have negative work-related consequences for women. For example, an administrator who subscribes to this notion—and who finds support from academic discussions on the subject—might decide against selecting a woman for a coveted project or position in a work group if there is already a female member in the group for fear that

the cohesion of the group will decline as a result. For these reasons, an examination of the available evidence and a discussion of future directions are long overdue. Only then can women aspiring to leadership and full professorships recognize the benefits of having positive professional relationships with other female colleagues.

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