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Public Prejudice against Women School Administrators: The Possibility of Change¹

This paper uses survey data to explore the extent to which greater contact with women school administrators and changing generations can influence public prejudice toward women administrators and override the impact of regional and educational differences on these attitudes. Little support is found for these possibilities. Specifications of cognitive dissonance and consistency theories, specifically involving the problems of generalizing from one situation to another and the need for sufficient stimuli to create dissonance, are used to explain these findings. If affirmative action programs result in more women being hired for line administrative positions, however, it is suggested that sufficient dissonance or cognitive inconsistency may be created to produce attitude change.

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For at least the last 50 years, the proportion of school administrators who are women has declined,² to the point where today women represent less than 5 percent of all line administrators in school districts.³ While women may avoid preparing and applying for these positions, those who control the hiring process also promote their exclusion by actively refusing them jobs or by simply not encouraging their participation. School administration is not perceived to be a "woman's place."⁴ This view is reflected in attitudes of the general public toward women administrators. In fact, one reason school officials give for not hiring women is that the public is prejudiced against women administrators. This prejudice is generally more extreme among rural residents and the less highly educated than among urban residents and more highly educated people.

In recent years, feminists have called for an end to these prejudiced attitudes and for increased representation of women in public school administration. As with all attempts at social reform, however, debates occur over how best to promote change. Some people advocate waiting for the public gradually to develop favorable attitudes toward women administrators as younger, more liberal generations come of age. Social psychological theories, however, suggest that greater contact of the

public with women administrators is one of the best ways to promote less prejudiced attitudes toward them and more acceptance of their hiring. This perspective underlies affirmative action programs developed in recent years to promote the hiring of women. In this paper, survey data are used to examine the credibility of these two positions. Variations both in attitudes and in their association with urbanization and education are studied.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Previous research indicates that teachers, administrators, and school board members do not support the hiring of women school administrators. Both male and female teachers report that they prefer to work with male administrators; and those who make hiring decisions, including superintendents and school board members, are usually opposed to appointing women.⁵ Interview data suggest that hiring officials believe that the general public does not approve of women administrators,⁶ even though an actual survey of a representative sample of adults found that over half of the respondents did not care whether a school principal was a man or a woman.⁷

Obviously, there are variations in people's attitudes. Some school officials are more prejudiced than others; some members of the public are more opposed to women administrators than are others. Some of these variations are explained by differences in demographic variables. For instance, the general public as well as school administrators in rural areas express more conservative attitudes toward women school administrators than do people in urban areas.⁸ More highly educated people and, within the adult population, younger people express more liberal attitudes toward women administrators and the roles of women in general.⁹ Such variations are usually explained by the exposure to liberal ideas that young, highly educated, and urban people more often experience. Continued exposure of this type could be interpreted to suggest that increased education, urbanization, and the coming of age of those who are now young will promote more liberal attitudes toward women administrators in the future, thus supporting the views of those who prefer to wait for prejudice to gradually disappear.

Knowing and interacting with members of the group against whom prejudice is shown also affect variations in attitudes. Many research studies have noted that contact between a majority and a minority group may lead to a decline in prejudiced attitudes.¹⁰ Similar results have been found in relation to prejudice against women administrators. Teachers who have worked with female administrators show more favorable attitudes toward their employment than teachers without such experience.¹¹

Changes in attitude have sometimes been explained by aspects of Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory¹² or by the more general area of cognitive consistency theory.¹³ These theories suggest that when people engage in behavior that is inconsistent with their attitudes, they develop a rationale for this behavior by adopting attitudes that are more consistent with their actual actions. For instance, if people who do not approve of hiring women school administrators come to know a competent woman administrator (and the evidence clearly suggests that women school administrators perform at least as well as, if not better than, their male colleagues¹⁴), they try to develop some consistency in their beliefs or some rationale for their new behavior by expressing less prejudiced attitudes. Thus, according to these perspectives, the most efficient way to alter people's attitudes may be to first change their behavior by promoting contact with women administrators. Such an approach supports the views of those who advocate programs such as affirmative action as ways to lessen prejudice.

It is not realistic to expect rural residential areas to disappear in the future nor to expect that someday all people will have the same amount of education. It is assured, however, that today's older generation will gradually be replaced by the young people of today. If the ascendance of a younger generation can override the influence of regional and educational differences on prejudice, and if affirmative action regulations are strictly enforced so that more and more members of the public will have contact with women school administrators, then it is expected that the impact of region and education on attitudes will decline and there will be an increased acceptance of women administrators in the future.

METHODOLOGY

The data used to examine the expectation stated in the previous paragraph came from personal interviews with a representative sample of noninstitutionalized adults in a western state in 1977. The sample was selected with a multistage area probability design that afforded each adult in the state an equal opportunity of responding. Detailed maps of both urban and rural areas were used, and households were selected for inclusion in the sample by either a table of random numbers or the selection of every "nth" housing unit. The former method was used in the largest city in the state, while the latter method was employed elsewhere. In this case, it is believed that the two methods gave equal results.

Personal interviews were conducted with the respondents by trained staff members of a well-known polling firm. A portion of each interviewer's work was verified for accuracy and authenticity. Eight hundred and

twenty-four people were contacted in the survey, and 812 responded to all the items subsequently used in the analysis. Fifty-one percent of the respondents were female; 49 percent were male.

Each respondent was asked the following questions:

Different people have different reactions to women in higher levels of public school administration. For example, how would you feel about having a woman as principal of an elementary school in your local area? [The interviewer then handed the respondent a card.] On this scale are ten numbers, running from plus five, meaning you would strongly approve, all the way down to minus five, meaning you would strongly disapprove. Just select the one number that best represents how you feel about having a woman as an elementary school principal in your area.

Now, using the same scale, how would you feel about having a woman as a high school principal in your area?

And finally, how would you feel about having a woman as a school district superintendent in your area?

The next question was:

Within the past ten years, have you happened to know or had any contact with women school administrators?

The answer to this question was coded simply "yes" (= 1) or "no" (= 2). Standard demographic data on age, place of residence, and educational background were also collected.

All of the variables used in this analysis except "region" may be treated as interval measures. Three categories are used to determine region: (1) the only metropolitan area within the state; (2) the second most populated region of the state, which includes many medium-size cities; and (3) the rural regions of the state. Two dummy variables represent this measure. In one, the nonzero category indicates the metropolitan area, and in the other, the nonzero category indicates the other cities. The zero category is the rural regions. This coding allowed treatment of the variables as indicators of urbanization.

Zero-order, partial, and multiple-partial Pearson product-moment correlations were used to examine the expectations previously discussed. Multiple-partial correlation coefficients are simple extensions of partial correlation coefficients when more than one independent variable is used.¹⁵

Based on previous research and the rationale presented earlier, it was hypothesized that:

1. the zero-order correlations between attitudes approving of women administrators and urbanization will be greater than zero;
2. the zero-order correlations between approving attitudes and higher education will be greater than zero;

3. the zero-order correlations between approving attitudes and having no contact with women administrators in the last ten years will be less than zero;
4. the zero-order correlations between approving attitudes and greater age will be less than zero.

If the correlations projected in hypothesis 4 hold, future social change might be possible with the changing of generations. If hypothesis 3 holds, it could be predicted that public prejudice toward women administrators would lessen with the enforcement of affirmative action regulations that would allow more people to know women administrators. In contrast, because all people will probably not attain high levels of education in the future or leave rural areas, the associations predicted in hypotheses 1 and 2 will probably have little long-range effect on social change.

However, if greater exposure to women administrators and the inevitable gradual changing of generational cohorts were to override the impact of region of residence and educational attainment on attitudes, then change could be expected among the rural and less educated parts of the population also. For instance, if knowing a woman administrator were to override the influence of education and region of residence on the public's attitudes, then the following hypotheses would hold:

5. the multiple-partial correlations of region of residence with attitudes, controlling for knowing a woman administrator, will be zero;
6. the partial correlation of education with attitudes, controlling for knowing a woman administrator, will be zero;
7. the multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with region of residence and education, controlling for knowing a woman administrator, will be zero.

If the influence of age were to override the influence of education and region of residence on the public's attitudes, then the following hypotheses would hold:

8. the multiple-partial correlations of region of residence with attitudes, controlling for age, will be zero;
9. the partial correlation of education with attitudes, controlling for age, will be zero;
10. the multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with region of residence and education, controlling for age of the respondent, will be zero.

Finally, if together the changing of generations and the greater contact with women administrators were to override the influence of education and region of residence on attitudes, then the following hypotheses would hold:

11. the multiple-partial correlations of region of residence with attitudes, controlling for both age and knowing a woman administrator will be zero;
12. the partial correlation of education with attitudes, controlling for both age and knowing a woman administrator, will be zero;
13. the multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with region of residence and education, controlling for both the age of the respondent and education, will be zero.

If hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 hold, attitude change might be possible with greater enforcement of affirmative action regulations. If hypotheses 8, 9, and 10 hold, attitude change might be possible with the changing of generations. If hypotheses 11, 12, and 13 hold, attitude change could be predicted with both the changing of generations and the enforcement of affirmative action regulations.

RESULTS

Table 1 gives the means and standard deviations of each variable. The average respondent has a mean educational attainment of 12.04 years with a standard deviation of about four years. The average age of the respondents is about 44 years with a standard deviation of 16. The mean scores in the measures of the approval of women administrators all fall above 3.0, indicating that the respondents tend to support hiring women administrators at all three levels. The respondents are most supportive of women as elementary principals and slightly less supportive of women superintendents and women high school principals. There is also more variation in attitudes toward hiring women for these two more prestigious and well-paid roles. The mean of 1.70 indicates that less than half of all the respondents have known a woman administrator in the last ten years.

The zero-order correlations all occur as expected in hypotheses 1 to 4. While most of the correlations are significantly different from zero, none is overwhelmingly large and much variation in attitudes is unexplained by these variables (see Table 2). First, the coefficients indicate that people in the more urban areas of the state are more supportive of women administrators. While the correlations of the two dummy variables with approval of women as secondary principals and superintendents are quite close, the difference in the correlations of the two dummy variables with attitudes toward women elementary principals (.028 and .096) indicates that support for them is strongest in the region with medium-size cities. The multiple coefficients of attitudes with region are all significant at the .01 level or beyond. They indicate that region of

residence affects attitudes toward women elementary principals and women school superintendents slightly more than attitudes toward women as secondary principals.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Variables

	Means	Standard Deviations
Approval of a woman elementary principal (-5, strongly disapprove, to + 5, strongly approve)	3.85	2.34
Approval of a woman secondary principal (-5, strongly disapprove, to + 5, strongly approve)	3.01	3.17
Approval of a woman school superintendent (-5, strongly disapprove, to + 5, strongly approve)	3.14	3.10
Region of residence		
1a (other/metro area)	0.47	0.50
1b (other/cities)	0.27	0.44
Educational attainment (in years)	12.04	4.10
Knowing a woman administrator in the last 10 years (1 = yes, 2 = no)	1.70	0.46
Age (in years)	43.62	16.10
N = 814.		

Second, the correlations of attitudes with education are all significantly different from zero at the .001 level. As hypothesized, they show that people with higher levels of education are more supportive of women administrators than those with lower levels of education. This trend is stronger for attitudes toward women as secondary principals and superintendents than as elementary principals.

Third, correlations indicate a slight trend for those who have not known a woman school administrator in the past ten years to be less supportive of women holding administrative posts now. The strongest correlation occurs with attitudes toward women as secondary principals ($r = -.080$). None of these correlations, however, is higher than the other correlations with the dependent measures, and the coefficient of $-.049$ with attitudes toward women school superintendents does not reach significance at the .05 level.

Fourth, the zero-order correlations show that younger people are more supportive of women in administrative posts than are older people. Each of these correlations is significantly different from zero at the .001 level. This trend is somewhat stronger with attitudes toward women in the secondary principal ($r = -.167$) and superintendent chairs ($r = -.182$) than in elementary principalships ($r = -.119$).

Table 2
Correlations of Independent and Control Variables with Attitudes toward Women Administrators

Independent Variables	Woman Elementary Principal	Approval of a: Woman Secondary Principal	Woman School Supt.
1. Region of residence			
1a (other/metro area)	.028	.055	.067*
1b (other/cities)	.096**	.049	.067*
$R_{...}$ (1a, 1b) (rural/metro, cities)	.138***	.111**	.143***
2. Educational attainment (in years)	.106***	.141***	.149***
Control Variables			
3. Knowing a woman administrator in the last 10 years (1 = yes, 2 = no)	-.067*	-.080*	-.049
4. Age (in years)	-.119***	-.167***	-.182***

All correlations are Pearson product-moment correlations except in the case of the two dummy variables for region, where the summary measure is a multiple correlation.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

N = 814.

Critical values:

$p \leq .05$, $r \geq .058$ (df = 1,812), $R \geq .086$ (df = 2,811).

$p \leq .01$, $r \geq .086$ (df = 1,812), $R \geq .106$ (df = 2,811).

$p \leq .001$, $r \geq .108$ (df = 1,812), $R \geq .129$ (df = 2,811).

Table 3 gives the partial and multiple-partial correlations used to test hypotheses 5 through 13.¹⁶ They show little support for the hypotheses. Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 test the impact of knowing a woman administrator on the correlations of attitudes with region of residence and education. Comparison of the results for hypotheses 5 and 6 in Table 3 with those for hypotheses 1 and 2 in Table 2 shows that the partial and multiple-partial correlations are almost the same as those at the zero order. For instance, the multiple correlation of approval of a woman elementary principal with region is .138. When knowing a woman administrator is introduced as a control variable, the multiple-partial coefficient is also .138. Similarly, the correlation of approving of a woman secondary principal with education is .141 at the zero order. When knowing a woman administrator is introduced as a control variable, the partial correlation coefficient drops only slightly, to .122. Both of these partial coefficients are significantly different from zero at the .001 level. The multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with region of residence and

education when knowledge is controlled are also all significantly different from zero at the .001 level.

Table 3
Impact of Knowing a Woman Administrator and Age on Variations in Public Attitudes

	Woman Elementary Principal	Approval of a: Woman Secondary Principal	Woman School Supt.
Impact of Knowing a Woman Administrator			
5. $R_{...}$ (1a, 1b) • Kn	.138***	.110**	.148***
6. $R_{...}$ (ed) • Kn	.089**	.122***	.141***
7. $R_{...}$ (1a, 1b, ed) • Kn	.162***	.162***	.198***
Impact of Age			
8. $R_{...}$ (1a, 1b) • Age	.135***	.101**	.136***
9. $R_{...}$ (ed) • Age	.071*	.091**	.095**
10. $R_{...}$ (ed, 1a, 1b) • Age	.149***	.136***	.164***
Impact of Both Age and Knowing a Woman Administrator			
11. $R_{...}$ (1a, 1b) • Kn, Age	.138***	.102***	.136***
12. $R_{...}$ (ed) • Kn, Age	.059*	.079*	.093**
13. $R_{...}$ (ed, 1a, 1b) • Kn, Age	.143***	.128***	.161***

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

att = attitudes of approval (range of -5 to + 5).

1a = dummy variable, region of residence (other/metro area).

1b = dummy variable, region of residence (other/cities).

Kn = knowing a woman administrator in the last ten years (1 = yes, 2 = no).

ed = educational attainment of respondent in years.

Age = age of respondent in years.

Controlling for age has a somewhat greater effect, especially on the correlations of attitudes with educational level. (Compare the results of the tests of hypotheses 8 and 9 in Table 3 with those for hypotheses 1 and 2 in Table 2.) Again, however, the multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with both region of residence and education when the influence of age is controlled are all significantly different from zero at the .001 level.

Finally, controlling for both knowing a woman administrator and age lowers the correlations between region of residence and attitudes only slightly. Only the association between education and attitudes, especially with reference to women as elementary principals, is much lower than the zero-order correlation when both knowing a woman administrator and age are controlled. All of these correlations, however, are significantly different from zero at the .05 level or beyond. The multiple-partial correlations of attitudes with region and education when both knowledge and age are controlled are slightly lower than when only one or the other

control variable is used separately. Yet, all of these correlations are still significantly different from zero.

DISCUSSION

Because these survey data were gathered at only one point in time, causal inferences, especially concerning future events, are far from infallible. While it is doubtful that the order of causality has been misinterpreted (e.g., suggesting that knowing a woman administrator influences attitudes while in reality those with more favorable attitudes seek out women administrators to meet), it is entirely possible that other variables or unforeseen events could intervene and alter the correlations that have been observed here. Nevertheless, because one can never be certain about this possibility, the results reported above may provide some indication of potential changes in public prejudice toward women administrators.

Age and knowing a woman administrator explain only from 0.2 percent to 3 percent of the total variation in prejudiced attitudes. At first glance, this indicates that neither changing generations nor greater contact with women administrators will dramatically decrease the incidence of prejudice toward women administrators. Moreover, neither the influence of regional differences nor education on attitudes is eliminated when the impact of knowledge and age is removed, although there is a slight tendency for age to override the influence of education on attitudes. This primarily occurs because age is moderately associated with education ($r = .334$). To the extent that younger generations continue a pattern of advanced schooling, we can anticipate a decrease in, though not a disappearance of, the influence of education on attitudes. This assumes, of course, that succeeding generations maintain the more liberal attitudes of today's younger generation. It does not appear that changing generations will affect regional differences in attitudes, and they will likely continue.

Similarly, knowing a woman administrator appears to do little to override regional and educational differences in prejudiced attitudes. Other factors, however, may affect these relationships and make conclusions about the impact of knowing a woman administrator premature. First, most women who are school administrators are not in the major positions of authority examined. In the year of the survey, 13 percent of all school administrators in the state studied were women, yet only 1.7 percent of these women were high school principals, and 0.7 percent, or two of the 300, were superintendents. Twenty-two percent of the women administrators were principals at levels lower than high school while 75

percent of the women administrators held staff positions such as supervisors of special education programs and curriculum coordinators. It is probable that very few of the respondents who reported knowing a woman administrator in the last ten years actually knew one who held a line position, especially the more powerful high school principal or superintendent posts. Simply knowing a woman who is a school administrator in a *staff* position then may not affect one's attitude toward women holding the more prestigious *line* positions of principal or superintendent. Second, because so few women now hold school administrative posts, their presence may not be large enough to create dissonance or cognitive inconsistency. Perhaps a significant step toward integration must be made before the women's presence can affect public attitudes.

These speculations are supported by specifications of cognitive dissonance and consistency theories as they are applied to the effects of intergroup contact. Studies of racial groups show that while integration in one setting may influence less prejudiced attitudes there, this may not generalize to other settings.¹⁷ Specifically, knowing women who hold staff administrative posts without ultimate authority may not influence greater acceptance of women in other more powerful administrative positions.

In addition, having only a small number of minority group members available for contact may produce little challenge to previous attitudes because those available are simply viewed as exceptional people. If this is the case, little change in attitudes would be forthcoming. Proponents of school integration suggest that having minorities comprise from 20 percent to 45 percent of the total population of an integrated school may provide the best situation for stimulating attitude change.¹⁸ Obviously, the proportion of total women school administrators, let alone those in top line positions, has not yet reached even the lower limit of this range. Thus, they may not yet be present in sufficient numbers to cause the dissonance or inconsistency necessary to produce attitude change.

These results also have implications on a more practical level. They suggest that neither affirmative action programs nor changing generations will automatically result in less public prejudice toward women administrators or in alterations in regional and class differences in attitudes. If attitude change is to occur, women must be hired specifically for the more powerful line positions as well as for staff positions. Until women fill more of these posts, it may be premature to expect significant attitudinal change. The findings also point to the important independent influence of regional and, to some extent, educational differences on attitudes. Even when the knowing of a woman administrator and the age of the respondents are taken into account, those in rural regions and with less education have more prejudiced attitudes. This does not mean that

affirmative action programs will not affect these people but, rather, that greater planning and care may be needed for successful programs for those populations.

CONCLUSION

Two alternative methods of lessening prejudice against women school administrators have been proposed. Some advocate waiting for the public gradually to develop more favorable attitudes as younger, more liberal generations come of age. Others, following cognitive dissonance and cognitive consistency theories, suggest that promoting contact with women administrators through programs such as affirmative action will be more effective. In this paper, survey data were used to explore the validity of the two approaches. The extent to which greater contact with women school administrators and changing generations can influence public prejudice toward women administrators and the extent to which they can override the influence of regional and educational differences on attitudes were examined. The analysis gives little support for the views that changing generations or greater contact with women administrators will eliminate prejudice and its variations by region and education.

Yet, theoretical considerations preclude totally discarding the latter perspective. Specifications of cognitive dissonance and consistency theories, especially those involving the problems of generalizing from one situation to another and the need for sufficient stimuli to create dissonance, can help explain the findings. Women administrators are few in number, and they are usually in staff, not line, positions. Evidence from other areas indicates that there may not be enough women administrators to create dissonance and that contact with a minority group in one post (such as staff positions) does not influence attitudes toward them in another post (such as the line positions of superintendent or principal). In terms of practical implications, this analysis suggests that if affirmative action programs result in more women being hired into line administrative positions, it is conceivable that sufficient dissonance or cognitive inconsistency could be produced to create attitude change.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Kenneth Kempner for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
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