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Women Leaders in Oxford House

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined women assuming leadership roles in Oxford Houses, which are communal, democratically run recovery settings for substance use disorder. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 women Oxford House leaders who shared their thoughts and experiences on leadership. Several themes emerged from qualitative data analysis, most notably that stepping up and accepting a leadership role in Oxford House had a positive effect on self-esteem, which is vital to women with a history of substance abuse. Barriers to leadership were also identified such as negative interpersonal relationships with other women. A number of methods mentioned to increase the number of women leaders included: developing workshops, providing positive encouragement, and accessing existing female role models. The implications of this study are discussed.

Introduction

Oxford Houses are democratically run recovery home systems that serve over 10,000 individuals in the United States [1]. The essential principles of Oxford House are self-help, discipline, and self-support [2]. The democratic, self-run property of Oxford Houses differentiates them from many recovery models; instead of employing staff to manage day to day house operations, house members elect house officials to take on these responsibilities. This feature not only gives residents an opportunity to build responsibility, but also keeps the costs associated with maintaining Oxford Houses low when compared to other substance abuse treatment options, such as staffed inpatient treatment facilities [3]. There are no limits on how long a resident can stay in a house. The homes are usually found in middle-income neighborhoods [2]. Each Oxford House is without staff, is single gendered, and consists of an average of eight members who share financial and administrative responsibilities for the home. Members provide one another with abstinence-specific social support in their recovery efforts [2].

A person wishing to join an Oxford House must complete an application and undergo an interview conducted by current residents. While there is no minimum length of sobriety required for acceptance into a house, new members often come to Oxford House after either a 28-day rehabilitation program, or a detoxification program. Any resident may stay in an Oxford House for as long as desired, provided that she or he abstains from substance abuse, contributes her or his fair share financially, and is not disruptive [4]. The shared responsibilities of people with similar experiences that Oxford House facilitates contribute to a communal setting for abstinence-specific support [5,6]. Oxford House residents tend to be more involved in their homes than do residents of other larger, staff-run recovery settings [7].

One way for Oxford House members to get involved in the governance of their houses is to take on a leadership position. The Oxford House model is democratically run at every level, allowing members to take part in an array of leadership opportunities. Within individual houses, officers are elected. There are five available positions at the house officer level: House President, House Treasurer, House Secretary, House Comptroller, and House Coordinator. The House President is in charge of holding house meetings. The House Treasurer maintains financial records for the house. The House Secretary manages new membership applications, records minutes of house meetings, updates the Oxford House website for house vacancies on a weekly basis, and sends thank you notes to contributors. The House Comptroller collects rent, manages day to day expenses, and works in conjunction with the House Treasurer to balance the books for the house. The House Coordinator manages house chores. Those eligible for election to a house position must be a resident of that house, and members are elected for a six month term [2].

Oxford House has more than 1,600 houses in the United States, and houses in close proximity to one another form chapters. These chapters encourage the expansion of Oxford House by providing guidance and support to individual houses. Chapters also serve the important function of reaching out to the recovery community in order to spread information about Oxford House to potential members. Chapters meet monthly and allow participants to experience a higher level of leadership by serving as a chapter officer for a term of one year [2]. At the chapter officer level, there are also five available positions: Chapter Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary, and Housing Services Committee Chairperson. The Chapter Chairperson ensures that monthly meetings take place. The Vice Chairperson assists the Chairperson and runs meetings in the Chairperson's absence. The Treasurer takes care of chapter financial matters, such as collecting house dues and depositing them in the chapter's checking account. The Secretary takes notes at chapter meetings, sends the monthly report to the World Services Office, and reminds houses within the chapter about upcoming meetings. The Housing Service Committee Chairperson visits both houses that are in trouble and houses that need experienced residents' assistance to get started. Those eligible for election to chapter officer positions must be currently living in one of the Oxford Houses that makes up the chapter [2].

In addition to in-house and chapter positions, members also have an opportunity to serve on the state board. At the highest level of leadership, the Oxford House World Council consists

of 12 members, nine of whom are current Oxford House residents and three of whom are alumni [2].

Because houses are single gendered, women must naturally assume leadership roles in women's houses. Although the qualities that women in Oxford House look for in their leaders has been studied [8], no previous studies have examined the experiences of women who have taken on leadership roles in the Oxford House World Services. This qualitative study used grounded theory to explore factors contributing to women's participation in leadership roles within the Oxford House organization.

Methods

This study was approved by the Institution Review Board at DePaul University. Semi-structured interviews, consisting of 12 questions, were conducted with 10 women leaders in Oxford House. Participants were identified through a contact in the Oxford House organization. Eight of the interviews were conducted over the phone, while two were conducted in person. Of those interviewed, eight women were African American, two were Caucasian, and all were over the age of 40. These women were from various parts of the United States; four women were from the Midwest, two were from the East, two were from the South, and two were from the Northwest. Five of the women were state board members of Oxford House, three were high level executives, and two were outreach workers. Participants were asked about their thoughts, experiences, and recommendations regarding our research questions.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the grounded theory approach in order to identify themes that the interviews share and to isolate the characteristics that define female leaders in Oxford House [9]. In order to maintain a positive tone, our questions focused on how the already effective Oxford House system could be made even stronger through inclusive leadership. Two individual raters found comparable themes in the data.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data. Themes included leadership characteristics, leadership and recovery, other benefits of leadership, benefits of leadership to followers, effect of leadership on personal and professional life, lack of women leaders and barriers to leadership. The themes are discussed below.

Leadership characteristics

Several common traits emerged when participants were asked about important characteristics in leaders. Many respondents mentioned traits such as honesty and accountability as central to being a good leader. Participants also thought that being a motivation to others was an important trait. Finally, a majority of the respondents felt that leaders should also be seen as good role models. In describing themselves, most participants asserted that they felt they were good role models and inspired other women within Oxford House. They emphasized compassion, kindness, listening to their followers, and being honest, as traits they possessed as leaders.

Leadership and recovery

Many participants attributed their own gains in responsibility and accountability to being leaders in Oxford House. Additionally, leadership in Oxford House was often described as a distraction from the urge to return to substance use. Women reported that the responsibility of fulfilling Oxford House duties was so time consuming that they couldn't "slow down" and fall into old patterns of behaviors. One woman stated, "It has allowed me to focus on living and my daily responsibility. These are things that I never focused on before I came to Oxford House."

Other benefits of leadership

The opportunity to build self-esteem and confidence was identified by most of the participants as a benefit of being a female leader in Oxford House. Several women reported a gain in self-esteem when trusted to carry out leadership duties. Women recounted feeling empowered by their leadership roles, and also described the positive feelings that arose when they realized that they were an example or role model for other women in Oxford House. As one woman said, "...It has just made me grateful, to know that I can help people who are out there struggling and that I can help them through Oxford House, and that I can be a power of example to others."

Benefits of leadership to followers

Participants attributed their ability to help female followers to the common experience of recovery. Understanding the particular challenges faced by mothers in Oxford House was described as particularly important. Participants could use their knowledge of resources to help women with practical and legal matters concerning children, as well as empathize and provide social support.

The ability to identify and cultivate individual strengths was noted as a characteristic of a good leader. When on the receiving end of this individual attention and encouragement, followers tended to experience improved self-esteem. One leader offered an example of this trend:

...We had a gal in the house, and she didn't have much confidence and she didn't think she could help at all. She was an art teacher, so I told her that it would be really helpful if she could make a banner for the conference. She said, 'You know, I think I can do that,' so she made the banner and did a beautiful job and from that point on she was always involved in things that were going on. Up until then she did not get involved. It's all about finding that little thing that somebody can do and encouraging them to do it.

Effect of leadership on personal and professional life

When asked about the effects that their leadership roles had on their personal lives, participants had both positive and negative comments. Women described experiencing personal growth and improved relationships with their families. Due to the time consuming nature of their leadership positions, however, they asserted that these responsibilities often detracted from their personal relationships, particularly romantic relationships. They

explained that male partners sometimes were jealous of the women's leader status or would become intimidated by it.

When speaking about leadership in relation to professional life, women's responses were more uniformly positive. They applied elements of personal growth, such as increased self-esteem, confidence, and responsibility, to their professional lives. The women reported that they benefited from increased networking opportunities as a result of leading in Oxford House. Participants also spoke about a general increase in their professionalism. The following quotes illustrate the mixture of personal and professional gains that some women experienced:

...It has allowed me to be a leader in my family; to be a positive influence. Most of my family uses drugs, including my children, so I have been able to show them that being clean is so much better than using drugs.

Yes, it has opened doors professionally. For the last 18 years in Oxford House, I was invited to go to all over the world to set up Oxford Houses. It continually opened doors, and gave me so many opportunities that I would not have gotten...

It has affected me positively because it has helped me to build relationships with other chapters and its members. It has also made me learn how to deal with people objectively and learn how to deal with the fine line that exists between peers and authority. But it takes time away from my boyfriend, and sometimes he doesn't understand why I have to go out late at night.

Lack of women leaders

Some women in the sample felt that there was not a lack of women's leadership in Oxford House. Several participants asserted that there were women leaders, and either described the opportunities that they saw for women, or listed prominent female Oxford House leaders. Several women noted that there are more male than female Oxford House members, and that the trends in leadership reflect Oxford House demographics, and not necessarily a true lack of women's leadership. One participant highlighted issues that can prove a hindrance to female leadership, while simultaneously acknowledging the male to female ratio:

...Women can't get over trying to outdo each other. Women who are addicts typically have a history of having bad relationships with other women. This makes interpersonal relationships in the house very hard and causes a lot of drama. This drama might turn women off from becoming deeper involved in Oxford House. Also, it might be because women don't stay as long and tend to move on rather quickly to be with their families. There are also just more men's houses. There are six times as many men's houses than women's, so there seems to be less opportunities for women to become leaders.

Barriers to leadership

When describing what factors may impede women from assuming leadership roles in Oxford House, a common response was to assign blame to the women themselves. Several women framed the deficiency in terms of women's character traits. Women often were described as too emotional or too combative with one another. Several participants described

women in Oxford House causing drama by competing with one another or holding grudges. Self-esteem was frequently mentioned as a factor that could block the progress of potential women leaders, but was often an essential piece of the participant's Oxford House leadership experience. Multiple participants characterized women within Oxford House as being too unsure about their self-worth or abilities to volunteer to lead others.

Others characterized women's families and social networks as responsible for pulling them away from Oxford House. Several participants stated that women's focus on romantic partners and their children kept them from contributing to the Oxford House movement. Respondents felt that reconnecting with their children, families, and significant others is often central to the recovery process. This reconnection often takes precedent in women's lives, leaving women feeling as though they have little time for other commitments.

Sexism was not entirely discounted as an explanation for why women might be hindered in achieving leadership roles in Oxford House. Participants disclosed that some men in Oxford House had negative attitudes toward women leaders. They described being disparaged by male leaders in Oxford House, or seeing other women guided to traditionally "feminine" roles, such as secretary. Several participants also acknowledged the effect that sexism in society at large may have on Oxford House women, such as growing up without being encouraged to become a leader, or earning less money than men.

Discussion

Numerous participant responses echoed one sentiment in particular: stepping up and accepting a leadership role in Oxford House can have a positive effect on self-esteem. As demonstrated in this study, leadership may improve self-esteem, which is vital to women with a history of substance abuse. Participants in this study repeatedly mentioned gains in self-esteem and confidence as a direct result of being a leader. Women felt trusted by their peers and had opportunities to execute their responsibilities and prove their capability to both themselves and to others. Serving as a role model or mentor to other recovering women was very important to participants, and helping others contributed to their improved feelings of self-worth.

Many women who abuse substances have had experiences with sexual or physical abuse, which can have a negative impact on their self-perception and sense of worth [10]. These adverse experiences can manifest themselves in adult substance abuse, especially in women, as a way to cope with the consequences of trauma [11–13]. Salina et al. [14] found that women who abused substances and had a history of both childhood and adult sexual victimization were more vulnerable to PTSD and multiple incarcerations. Women who have been victims of abuse are especially vulnerable to decreased self-esteem, which is associated with depression and can sometimes lead to suicidal ideation [15–17]. Due to their past involvement with substance abuse, many women in Oxford House are likely to have had experiences that are destructive to their self-worth. It is likely that being involved in a leadership role and the gains in self-esteem derived from this role may help women to address and overcome some of the issues that lead to their substance abuse.

Just as low self-esteem may be a contributing factor to substance use among women, high self-esteem may provide a buffer against it [18]. Involvement in leadership roles could potentially aid women in the development of greater self-esteem. This heightened level of self-esteem may in turn decrease drug use.

Furthermore, some leadership scholars take the stance that leadership is identity work, and that leaders are more than their official titles. These scholars emphasize internalization of the leadership role and the adoption of a sense of purpose [19,20]. In other words, leadership has as much to do with how individuals perceive themselves as it has to do with the objectives that they complete [19]. Experiences as a leader are essential to building a leadership identity. Through experience, a leader can accumulate feedback and information that helps them to mold their own leadership persona [19]. As this theory relates to the current study, a woman who thinks of herself as a leader will seek experiences that allow her to fill this role. If the woman is successful in achieving a leadership role, this permits her to accept this identity into her own perception of herself. Although this feedback loop can take a downward turn if a person is rejected as a leader, many people can follow this “positive spiral” into more leadership positions and a more grounded leadership identity [19].

Keeping in mind that the women in this study had past experiences with substance abuse, which may have negatively impacted their self-esteem and self-worth, they perceived themselves in a more negative light during periods of active drug using than at the time of the interview. Given the common participant response that taking on leadership responsibilities increased their self-esteem, allowing them to view themselves as leaders within the Oxford House organization, this indicates that women may have started thinking of their identities not as substance users with low self-worth, but as leaders with something of value to offer their followers via her service and role modeling. Some of these women also reportedly perceived themselves as leaders in more informal settings, such as among friends or family. Leading in diverse situations may reflect the internalization of the leadership identity, or following that “positive spiral” upwards. Some of the women in the study even reported now seeing themselves as leaders in life, seeking out leadership roles in different settings. While this study did not directly measure this identity concept, participant responses may suggest that some women have fully adopted the leadership identity. Thus, a leadership position in Oxford House could be the beginning of an identity shift for a woman. Because Oxford House members are generally more involved in their houses than members of other larger, staff-run recovery facilities, there is a chance that women in Oxford House will be driven toward a positive identity shift via house involvement and, perhaps, taking on a leadership role [7].

While the participants in our study had an overall positive experience with Oxford Houses, there certainly are challenges that some women face in these independent settings. For instance, Harvey et al. [21] found that some houses do close over time, for a variety of factors. Sustaining an Oxford House depends on five factors: affordable housing, residents following Oxford House principles, resident income, institutional support, and community support. If women are in houses that close due to financial difficulties due to too few people in the house or members not being able to secure and maintain work, those women will not reap the benefits of leadership in their respective houses. In other words, women leaders

must be able to build upon a sound foundation of a stable house in order to have a fulfilling leadership experience; given a stable housing situation, it would be more feasible to focus on improving their leadership skills or self-esteem.

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is that some participant demographics were not recorded. While the ethnicity and general ages, locations, and leadership positions of the women who participated in this study are known, more detailed demographics (such as number of children, marital status, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.) would have allowed for a clearer picture of the participants and their leadership experiences. Another limitation is the size and sampling technique used. Women were recruited using snow ball target sampling. Future studies should include a greater number of participants and interview questions that allow participants to expound on the themes which emerged in the current study.

Future studies might focus on collecting more in depth interviews with leaders about the experiences in Oxford House that contributed to their leadership development. This could inspire Oxford Houses to develop strategies to improve the experience of female residents, and encourage more women to become leaders [8]. This is especially important, as this study has found that being involved in leadership positions can contribute to a positive recovery process. Another possible direction for future research on leadership in Oxford House would be to study the experiences of male leaders within the organization. It would be interesting to examine any possible differences between the genders in terms of benefits and barriers to taking on leadership roles.

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