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## THE CASE OF LESLIE

### PRESENTING ISSUE

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Leslie is a 35-year-old White woman with a bachelor's degree in secondary education. She is seeking career counseling because she is considering quitting her current job as a math teacher in a large suburban high school. Leslie lives in a midsize metropolitan area in the Midwest; she is married, with a 10-year-old stepson.

Leslie reports a considerable amount of dissatisfaction with her current job, particularly related to the stress of many responsibilities and long working hours, as well as the impersonal nature of the school. Leslie reports that her dissatisfaction has been accumulating for several years but that recent events have brought it to the forefront. First, a newly hired principal has instituted administrative tasks to demonstrate teacher effectiveness that Leslie finds insulting to experienced teachers, such as requiring teachers to keep a weekly log of their activities, submit lesson plans for review, and file quarterly reports on teaching goals. She reports that these activities are "oppressive" and feels quite angry toward the principal. She also is frustrated by the increasing use of student performance on standardized achievement tests as a basis for teacher evaluation. Second, Leslie has had several interactions with parents this year that discouraged her greatly: On one hand, she has spent a considerable amount of time dealing with parents who closely monitor their children's grades online and contact Leslie frequently to discuss assignments; on the other hand, some parents showed little involvement in their children's school activities yet expected her to go "above and beyond" her responsibilities as a teacher. This is particularly frustrating because Leslie sees students dealing with increasingly difficult problems at home. She also is frustrated by the lack of intellectual challenge in her job.

On the positive side, Leslie reports that she did have an opportunity last year to teach an elective advanced math course, in which her students were more motivated and capable, and that she continues to enjoy the one-on-one aspects of teaching. She feels she is a good teacher, and she values the relationships that she develops with students. She displays considerable enthusiasm when discussing what she likes about teaching.

Leslie is unclear at this point whether or not she will quit her current job and, if so, whether she will look for another teaching position or a new career. She wants to explore

options to remain in education, whether in a traditional classroom or in some other venue. She also wants to explore new career options outside of teaching. She has thought about a wide range of possible career shifts, such as financial planning, social work, technical writing, and engineering. She is willing to consider pursuing further education if necessary for the career direction that she chooses.

## CAREER AND WORK HISTORY

Leslie grew up in a predominantly White suburban area, where she attended public schools. Leslie excelled in a number of subjects in middle school and high school, including math, science, and social studies. She was a member of the French club, was a math tutor for middle school children, and won first place in the high school science fair during her senior year. She did not actively seek out any positions of leadership within the school but was often viewed as a leader by others, in part because she assumed many organizational responsibilities.

Although her family expected her to go to college, she received little direction from them or her high school guidance counselor in choosing a college or selecting a field of study. She delayed making a decision about attending college until the summer after high school graduation and then decided to enroll at a local community college. She chose the community college because many of her friends were going there, it was close to home, and she was unsure about her motivation to pursue a college education and whether she would be successful.

During her first semester at the community college, she enrolled in general English, math, chemistry, and psychology courses. During this time, she ended a relationship with her high school boyfriend and began dating a college student who was home for Christmas vacation. The relationship flourished during her second semester, and he encouraged her to join him at the state university 90 miles from home. She finished her first year at the community college and decided to transfer to the state university, in part to join her boyfriend but also because she was disappointed by the lack of challenge in the math and science classes at her community college.

She entered her sophomore year at the university with a number of possible majors in mind but declared herself as “undecided.” She enjoyed taking a variety of classes while in college, and she contemplated a number of diverse options—mathematics, engineering, creative writing, psychology, and premedicine—prior to choosing her major. She enjoyed the challenge of her math classes but did not do well in computer-aided design and drafting. She did not enjoy being one of the few women in her advanced math classes, particularly because she had some negative experiences with professors who singled out her mistakes. A number of factors detracted from her serious consideration of a degree in mathematics, including lack of encouragement from professors and not wanting to commit to pursuing a graduate degree. Her lack of motivation to pursue postbaccalaureate training also precluded her from declaring a major in psychology or premedicine, and she decided not to major in engineering because two professors told her she would have a difficult time combining that career with a family. Leslie finally decided to major in secondary education, with an emphasis in mathematics education, because she could easily combine teaching with raising a family, she could still use her math skills, and teaching would not

require schooling beyond a bachelor's degree. In addition, she remembered enjoying her experiences as a math tutor in high school in which she had feelings of accomplishment when her students understood difficult concepts for the first time.

Leslie had a satisfying student teaching experience in a medium-size high school in her hometown, and she received positive feedback and excellent evaluations from her supervising teacher. This experience led her to feel excited and confident about her decision to become a teacher.

After graduating from college, Leslie took a teaching position in a small town about 2 hours from the city in which her family lived. Her first year in the position was very stressful, but she also loved being a teacher. As the only math teacher in the school, she taught a diverse range of classes and students, and she enjoyed the challenge of taking sole responsibility for her classes. She also enjoyed being a part of the community. However, she worked every night and weekend to keep up with lesson preparation and grading. She was the youngest teacher in the school and found it difficult to meet people with whom she could socialize outside of work. She also missed being close to her family, and her workload made it difficult for her to see them on weekends. Her relationship with her boyfriend suffered, and they ended the relationship during her second year of teaching.

After 3 years, Leslie found a teaching position in a large school district in the city in which her family lived and looked forward to being closer to them. She soon discovered that her new teaching position, although slightly less stressful, offered fewer rewards than her previous position. Because she was teaching in a larger school system, she was assigned five sections of freshman algebra, the least desirable teaching assignment. She found her students to be disinterested in the subject, and because they came from a wide geographic area, she no longer felt part of a community. She was also frustrated by the large bureaucratic structure of the school system. She was, however, able to find a greater degree of social support outside of work, including her family and high school friends. She has been in this position for 10 years.

Leslie has a number of interests outside her job, although she does not have much time to pursue any of these interests during the school year because of the time demands of her job. She enjoys several hobbies during the summer, including gardening and other outdoor activities, and teaches swimming lessons at the local YMCA. She also volunteers at the science center, where she maintains the membership records, and she teaches meditation classes at a local community center.

## FAMILY INFORMATION

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Leslie is the second of three children, with an older brother (age 38) and a younger sister (age 30). Her brother has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and works for a company that designs computer equipment. He was recently promoted to vice president of one of the company's product divisions in which he coordinates all aspects of a particular product line, from research and development to marketing and sales. He is married to a woman who is a personnel manager for a retail chain; they have two children. Leslie's sister has a bachelor's degree in nursing and has worked at a number of hospitals and home health agencies. She is currently out of the workforce while she cares for two young children; her husband is the district sales manager for a pharmaceutical company.

Leslie's parents are in their early 60s. Her father is a corporate attorney for a mid-size manufacturing firm, specializing in product liability and patents. His bachelor's degree was in chemistry, and he worked as a research and development chemist for 10 years before pursuing a law degree. Her mother attended several years of college but left school when she married Leslie's father. She has been involved in community arts organizations by, for example, volunteering as a docent at the art museum and serving on the board of the symphony orchestra. She did not work outside the home until Leslie's younger sister was in high school. At that time, she found a position with a small business specializing in office interior design, where she continues to work part time as an administrative assistant.

During college, Leslie's parents stated their support for whatever she chose as a major and provided the financial resources for her college education. Her father strongly encouraged her to major in business, but Leslie found that these classes were her least favorite. Her mother felt that the specific major was not critical as long as Leslie received a good education; she expected that Leslie would not remain in the workforce after marrying and having children. Leslie's family expressed some impatience when it was difficult for her to choose a major; Leslie's brother teased her for "changing her mind so often."

Leslie and her siblings all live within the same metropolitan area as her parents, and they see one another frequently. Leslie has discussed her job dissatisfaction with her family, and they have given her conflicting advice: Her father has renewed his encouragement of Leslie's pursuing a business career, her mother and sister have suggested that now would be a good time for Leslie to have children, and her brother has advised her to quit complaining about such inconsequential aspects of her job.

## MARITAL INFORMATION

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Leslie has been married to Joe (age 39) for 5 years. Joe has an associate's degree from a local community college and is currently a finish carpenter for a residential contractor. He enjoys his work and takes a great deal of pride in his reputation as a highly skilled craftsman; however, he has been thinking about finding a different line of work because of the job's physical demands and the seasonal fluctuations in available work.

Joe is the older of two sons from a middle-class Latino family; both his father and mother are of Mexican descent. Joe's father is a midlevel manager in a hardware store chain. Joe's mother worked as a housekeeper while Joe and his brother were young, but she quit working outside of the home when Joe's father was promoted into management. She has strong connections with the Latino community through her involvement in church and neighborhood activities. Joe's brother works as a youth services coordinator, organizing programs at a city-funded community center.

Joe grew up trying to be "American" like the other kids in school. He did not want to acknowledge his Mexican heritage. He refused to speak Spanish at home, he and his parents had great conflicts during his adolescence when he refused to go to church, and he did not include the other adolescents from his Latino neighborhood in his circle of friends. His parents were particularly upset when he did not show respect for his grandmother, who came to live with them when he was 15.

Joe graduated from high school with a C average. He did not consider going to college, because he did not enjoy high school and wanted to be working and earning money rather than going to school. The only class he liked in high school was his woodworking class, and he became an apprentice carpenter after graduation. He worked his way up to finish carpenter over 10 years. He has worked for the same contractor for the past 7 years.

After the conflicts with his family during and right after high school, Joe increasingly began to appreciate his Mexican heritage. He began to attend community and neighborhood events, although he chose not to live in the same community as his parents. He identifies himself as a Mexican American but has some resistance to the label “Latino.” He endorses many traditional Latino values: a strong emphasis on family, a preference for smooth interpersonal relationships, and respect owed to elders. He is more ambivalent about appropriate roles for men and women in the family. On the one hand, his mother’s highest goal was to stay home to care for her family; on the other hand, he realizes that some women want to work and to be more independent.

Joe’s first marriage was to a young Latino woman who grew up in the same neighborhood. They married at age 22, and his family was very happy that he would stay within their community. His wife, Maria Pilar, worked as a clerk in a small business. The conflicts in their marriage stemmed from her pressuring him to find ways to earn more money. Like his mother, her goal was to have a family and to be a homemaker. Maria was deeply involved in the Latino community and the church, and another source of conflict was his resistance to this level of involvement. Their marriage ended 2 years after their son was born. His first wife has since remarried and moved to another Latino community.

Leslie and Joe met through a common friend and dated for 6 months before marrying. Leslie’s family was not wholly supportive of her decision to marry Joe, although they did not express their feelings directly to Leslie. Joe’s family also had concerns about Joe and Leslie’s marriage; his mother was concerned that Leslie was too American. Their marriage has been relatively stable: Leslie describes herself as being happy in her marriage. She does, however, express some dissatisfaction with their relationship, primarily because of what she characterizes as their “lack of communication about important issues.” Leslie reports that Joe is supportive of her considering a career change, but she feels that he does not understand why she is unhappy with her job and that he seems hesitant about her returning to school. She speculates that some of Joe’s hesitation is due to questions about their ability to get by on only one income and forfeiting their access to health insurance through Leslie’s job.

Joe’s 10-year-old son from his first marriage now lives 300 miles from Leslie and Joe and spends school vacations with them, as well as an occasional long weekend. Leslie wants to have a child, and although Joe has expressed some ambivalence since before they were married, he has been supportive of Leslie’s desire. He expects that Leslie would postpone any career decisions if they were to have a child so that she could stay at home full time until the child was in school. This expectation is consistent with the division of labor that they have assumed, although Leslie is increasingly frustrated that Joe does not contribute more to household responsibilities. Leslie and Joe have had some difficulty related to pregnancy; Leslie had two miscarriages last year. The miscarriages were followed by marital tension and depression, for which Leslie sought individual therapy with a psychologist. Leslie reported that her previous experience with therapy was quite beneficial, although she now wishes that Joe had joined her in therapy.

## LESLIE'S EXPECTATIONS FOR CAREER COUNSELING

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Leslie was referred to career counseling by a coworker who had heard about the availability of career services. She is enthusiastic about career counseling, she is hopeful that the career counselor will help her define her career direction, and she expects to receive information and perhaps advice from the counselor about her “best” career option. She is eager to take the tests that the counselor recommends, stating that she is waiting to hear what the tests will tell her to do.

Leslie feels that she is at a crossroads in her life and is ready to explore her options for her next step. She is evaluating many aspects of her career, family relationships, and marriage. She is looking forward to beginning counseling.

## INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF LESLIE

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Use the following questions to formulate your initial impressions of her:

1. What have you learned about Leslie from the information presented thus far?
2. What general impressions do you have of Leslie? What impressions do you have of her as an employee? As a spouse? As a member of her family of origin?
3. What role do you think Leslie’s gender has played in her life and career decisions? What role do you think her culture and socioeconomic status have played? What role do you think her husband’s culture and socioeconomic status have played?
4. What more would you like to know about Leslie?
5. What observations or hypotheses do you have about Leslie that the assessment data might clarify? What specifically will you look for in the assessment results?
6. How would you describe her primary career issue(s)? How might you prioritize the direction of counseling? Where would you like to begin in working with Leslie?

### **Cultural Context in Conceptualizing Leslie’s Career History**

Leslie grew up as the middle child of a relatively affluent White, middle-class family in a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. Her ethnicity is not specified, other than to note that she is Caucasian. She is, however, a product of one or more cultures that transmitted values and messages about being a Caucasian woman in the United States. Giordano and McGoldrick (1996) note that “all people are ethnic. . . . It is a fact of our identities, one over which we have no choice” (p. 428). Whites often conceptualize themselves as not having a culture, as being “regular” Americans. However, their cultural backgrounds, whether their ancestors came from the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, or Western Europe, have shaped the way they view the world, their relationship with nature, the way they define family, the way they define work, and their view of time.

To understand fully Leslie's career history, it is critical to understand the cultural messages she received growing up as a White woman.

Katz (1985) discusses several aspects of the White culture. She notes that "Whites share similar cultural dimensions that constitute a separate, unique culture" (p. 616). She explicitly identifies several components of White cultural values and beliefs. These include a focus on individualism, with its emphasis on autonomy and independence; a focus on competition; and a value placed on winning. There is a strong pragmatic orientation, with an emphasis on doing something about a situation or problem. Future planning is stressed, and progress and growth are valued. The scientific method is the favored mode, with preference given to rational and linear thinking and to decision making based on objective as opposed to subjective information. Status and power are based on position and title, and value is placed on economic possessions. The world is viewed as a place to master rather than as a place to tolerate or in which to coexist with nature. Family is primarily viewed as the nuclear family rather than as an extended family including many generations. The Protestant work ethic predominates: Hard work is good, and working hard brings success. Time is viewed as a saleable entity that is apportioned out according to set schedules; deviations from time schedules are not tolerated.

Leslie received messages from her family consistent with White cultural expectations. She was taught to work hard, as evidenced by her excellent academic work in high school. Her family expected her to plan for the future in anticipating that she would go to college. However, they also clearly conveyed a value on individualism and autonomy in not giving her much direction or guidance in choosing a career or a major. Her father communicated a value placed on pragmatic gain in recommending that she enter a business field, although this did not coincide with her interests. Her family also may have transmitted several values in showing their impatience with her decision-making process. They may have indicated that she ought to be more rational and linear in her decision making, taking the information she had and simply making a decision with it. This also is consistent with a preference for doing something about a situation perceived as problematic rather than living with it. Leslie's family also appears to have conveyed messages about appropriate careers for their children that allowed them to gain positions of power and status.

Leslie also received messages of appropriate behavior as a White woman; some of these messages are in direct conflict with appropriate behavior as a White individual. White women are expected to be nurturing and to put others' needs before their own. They are expected to be caring and to be kind and helpful to others, particularly other White people. They also are perceived as being emotional, weak, illogical, and needing security from others. Thus, the culture tells White women to be independent *and* dependent, logical *and* emotional. White women are expected to be passive *and* to take control of a situation. They are to be nurturing *and* autonomous. Leslie seems to have received these mixed messages. She was to be autonomous in making a career decision, but her mother communicated that she should not pursue that career at the same time she was taking care of a family. Her parents may have communicated that the occupation of teacher is a more appropriate occupation for a woman than going into a math or science career, since she would be taking care of others as a teacher. She may also have received messages that it is more appropriate to rely on others to help make decisions rather than being emotionally independent. She may have received messages to avoid positions of leadership and power.

It is not clear what Leslie's perceptions of other races were while she was growing up. She grew up in a suburb of a large Midwestern city; she may have grown up in a racially segregated environment. If so, then she had little contact with individuals of other races while she was growing up, thus having little opportunity to develop a consciousness of herself as a member of a racial/ethnic group or to develop a knowledge or understanding of other groups. On the other hand, Leslie may have grown up in a racially integrated neighborhood and may have had significant interpersonal relationships with children from many cultural groups. She may have developed a strong sense of herself as a member of a racial group and an appreciation of and understanding for other cultures. She may, in fact, have spent a great deal of time exploring her own cultural heritage(s) and may have gained an appreciation of the role of White privilege in the United States. Whichever the case, her early upbringing and the messages her family, neighborhood, and school gave her about her own race and about other races helped form her later racial perceptions and attitudes.

Leslie moved to her first job in a small town in the Midwest, which was most likely homogeneously White. Her frustrations with the job appeared to have little to do with the culture of the town but rather with the workload in her job and with the lack of a social support network. She had ended her relationship with her boyfriend, whose ethnicity is not given. She met her husband, Joe, when she was nearly 30. He is second-generation Mexican American. Joe appears to have had some ambivalence about identifying with his Mexican American heritage. He wanted to conform to the dominant culture's behavioral expectations when he was an adolescent, refusing to speak Spanish or to attend church with his family, but his first marriage was to a Latina woman from his neighborhood. He appears to have become more involved in his community and to have developed a greater appreciation for the traditions and values of his heritage. After his marriage dissolved, he appears to have retained his sense of identity as a Mexican American. Although he eventually married a White woman, Leslie, and no longer lives in his family's neighborhood, he still self-identifies as a Mexican American and has embraced many traditional values.

Joe and Leslie's marriage appears to be problematic for both sets of in-laws. Leslie's marriage to a member of another ethnic group may have been an issue for her parents. There are indications that they accepted him as a member of the family, since Leslie and Joe spend a fair amount of time with her family. Leslie's family's initial concerns for her marriage to Joe may have been due less to his ethnicity than to her marriage to a divorced father of one son; they also may have reacted because of their own prejudices and lack of racial awareness. Social class may be another factor that influenced Leslie's family's reaction to Joe, since Joe's educational and occupational level are quite different from those of the rest of her family. Joe's mother has said she thinks Leslie is too American. This may have caused conflicts for Leslie with her mother-in-law; it may also cause conflict between Joe and Leslie if Joe feels torn between his family and his wife.

## **Cultural Context in Conceptualizing Leslie's Present Situation**

Conceptualizing Leslie's current situation from a multicultural perspective includes examining Leslie's behaviors and values from the multiple cultural contexts in which she lives. She is a close member of her White family and continues to be influenced by their expectations and values. She is married to a Mexican American man, who has expectations



for her behavior that may stem from his own cultural background and values. She works in a high school setting that may have a racially diverse faculty and students.

Leslie's family has conveyed to her that she should be pursuing a career that will give her position and economic benefits and have also suggested that she should start a family; the latter connotes that she cannot both work and raise a family. They again show some impatience with what they perceive as her slow decision making. Her father is still advocating a business career, her mother and sister still suggesting that she stop working to have children. Her brother communicates that she is perhaps making an emotional decision in examining her career choices; he has labeled her dissatisfaction as complaints about inconsequential aspects of her job.

Leslie's husband, Joe, also expects that she would stay home if they have children. She feels that though he is supportive of her changing careers, he is less supportive of her returning to school. The role of women in the traditional Latino family is one of being subservient to their husbands and of caring and nurturing children, a role to which his mother conformed. A woman is expected to be passive and dependent on her husband. Caretaker of the family is her predominant purpose in life. On the other hand, Joe indicates that he knows that women should be able to be independent. Leslie may be violating some of his expectations in her interest in pursuing a career change. Though she and Joe want to have a family together, she may be reluctant to assume the role that he wants her to play in that family. It is not clear whether Joe expects her to play a particular role with his son. Leslie and Joe's lack of communication may be due to differences in cultural values; she may be focusing on discussing all her concerns with him, thereby creating conflict, while he may be motivated by the Latino value of smoothing over conflicts and having harmonious relationships.

Finally, Leslie works in a high school that may or may not be racially diverse in the students she is serving and the faculty with whom she works. Whichever the case, race may be playing a role in Leslie's decisions. Her perceptions that parents are uninvolved in their children's education may actually be due to a cultural difference in attitudes and behaviors. What she is interpreting as lack of involvement may be a cultural respect for authority and viewing the teacher as the expert. Similarly, her perceptions that students are having more difficulties at home may be due to her own racial assumptions about problems. In other words, Leslie may be interpreting her students' behavior from a cultural deficit model, thus concluding that they are dealing with many problems at home.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What specific hypotheses would you develop about Leslie from culturally appropriate counseling approaches? How does using these approaches help you understand Leslie? How might it help Leslie understand herself?
2. What role may Leslie's worldview have played in her career development and choices?
3. How could you balance increasing awareness of race and ethnicity as possible influences in Leslie's decision making with an appreciation of her racial consciousness? Where might this be problematic?
4. How could you empower Leslie to make different types of decisions?

5. How may culture have interacted with Leslie's family of origin and her familial obligations to shape her behavior?
  6. What role may sexism and racism have played in Leslie's decisions and in the outcomes of those decisions?
  7. How might cultural issues influence the relationship between Leslie and Joe?
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## CONCEPTUALIZING LESLIE FROM VARIOUS THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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The material in this chapter provides sufficiently rich information to begin forming hypotheses about Leslie's career concerns. In the next chapter, we consider different assessment tools that might provide additional information related to Leslie, which provide additional information to guide hypotheses. We then turn to specific theoretical perspectives on working with Leslie. In each chapter, we add supplementary information about Leslie as appropriate to the specific theory or approach. This additional information is particularly relevant to the "working model" of Leslie that a counselor using a particular theory would be likely to develop.

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