Chapter 25

Critical Race Theory:
A Framework for Examining Social Identity Diversity of Black Women in Positions of Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a qualitative, narrative case study that seeks to unveil the social identity diversity of leadership from the perspective a Black woman leader. Social identity diversity is a form of difference that marginalized groups, such as Black women, experience in predominantly White organizational and institutional settings as a result of intersectionality. Social identity diversity creates multiple dynamics for groups such as Black women who hold leadership positions in the aforementioned settings. This study highlights the need for more inclusive and cultural perspectives of leadership, which calls for more inclusive theoretical frameworks that consider the social identity diversity of the leader. Critical race theory is presented as a theoretical framework that is useful for explaining how systems of power sustain domination and oppression in organizational and institutional settings. Implications for an emerging social justice paradigm are given.

INTRODUCTION

For the most part, the leadership experiences of Black women leaders has been subsumed within the larger discussion of women leaders, as well as the more traditional discussion that has been articulated from and towards the leadership of White, middle-class men. Although feminist literature speaks to the issue of gender equality,

feminist perspectives do not make an issue for equality in terms of racial oppression or social class designation. As a result, gender equality has not adequately captured the convergence of gender with race and social class. The convergence or intersection of race, gender, and social class has been commonly referred to as intersectionality, a term that denotes the various ways these social constructs interact and shape multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). This intersection is an interlocking system

of oppression containing a multiplier effect; that is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism (King, 1988). Intersectionality can create social identity diversity, a form of difference that marginalized groups (such as Black women) experience in predominantly White organizational and institutional settings. Social identity diversity creates multiple dynamics for marginalized groups such as Black women who hold leadership positions in the aforementioned settings.

This study highlights the need to re-emphasize social constructs (race, gender, social class) as foundations for diversity in organizational and institutional settings. Discussions on diversity now include lifestyles, ideas, education, personality, and an emerging array of schools of thought that have minimized the historical and legally mandated need to ensure equality. As new topics are added to the diversity list, the "isms" of diversity (racism, sexism, and classism) have become minimized and relegated to the sidelines. In order to frame the term diversity within a historical background, it is necessary to recognize social identity diversity as the diversity upon which bias, prejudice, and discrimination in this country is rooted.

Statement of the Problem

While some discussion has been given to the obstacles Black women encounter in reaching positions of leadership in predominantly White organizations, less conversation has taken place concerning how Black women are disempowered to lead in settings where their social identity is associated with socially disadvantaged groups (Byrd, 2009a). Socially disadvantaged refers to individuals who have been subjected to ethnic prejudice or cultural bias because of their identity as a member of a group without regard to their individual qualities (SBA, 2004). One reason for the disempowerment of Black women is that the idealized and fixed image in Western culture of who leads in organizations has generally fit the stereotype of middle-class, White men and more recently White women (Byrd, 2008; Parker, 2005). Black women entering predominantly White organizations in positions of leadership are confronted with disrupting this fixed image of 'leader.' To address the aforementioned, research and theory is needed that explains how Black women struggle in their everyday, lived leadership experiences to disrupt an image associated with their social identity and create a new image of 'who leads.'

In order to better understand the social identity diversity of Black women as leaders, the discourse on leadership should reflect the lived experiences of the leader (Gostnell, 1996). Lived experience is not secondhand; rather, it is how an individual perceives, describes, feels, judges, remembers, makes sense of, and talks about the experience (Patton, 2002). "A person cannot reflect on experience while living through the experience… reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 9). Consequently, lived experiences are ways that people experience life based on their social location within society (Byrd, 2009a).

This study will therefore explore the following research question: *How does social identity diversity influence the everyday, lived leadership experiences of Black women in predominantly White organizations?* A goal of this study is to bring the perspectives of Black women to the discourse on leadership and shift conversations of leadership to the social identity of the leader. The ultimate goal is to begin conceptualizing new and more inclusive theories of leadership.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF BLACK WOMEN AS LEADERS

Black women have developed an innate sense of survival that is grounded in the historical struggle against oppression that has been experienced by the Black community (Byrd, 2009b). Being

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