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Re-Constructing the Leadership Model of Social Justice for African-American Women in Education
Dr. Mary L. Grimes

The mainstream epistemology about women in educational leadership roles has been constructed, canonized, and theorized from a white hegemonic female perspective. The early literature about women as leaders include *The Managerial Woman* (Henning & Jardim, 1977); *Men and Women of the Corporation* (Kanter, 1977); *Paths to Power* (Josefowitz, 1980); *The Androgynous Manager* (Sargent, 1981); *Women and Men as Leaders* (Heller, 1982); *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982); and *Feminine Leadership* (Loden, 1985). This literature suggests that women lead from a different frame of reference due to their socialization process. Because of male dominated managerial customs that exist in the workplace, in some instances, they experience obstacles to leadership. Recent mainstream white female scholars like Shakeshaft (1989) and Bensimon (1989) suggest that the feminist perspective is not recognized in the leadership literature. Shakeshaft posits that women's leadership experiences are generalized into one category and that the leadership discussion appears androcentric in nature. Bensimon (1989) suggests that the prevailing leadership theories do not take into account that "women experience the social world differently than men do and that this translates into a particular epistemology and a particular ethic. it translates into a different experience of leadership. gender must be taken into consideration" (Bensimon, 1989, p. 146).

African-American women, on the other hand, experience the cultural, contextual, social, behavioral, and linguistic world differently than white females. To silence the African-American woman's voice in the leadership literature further marginalizes her and her experiences. Historically, African-American women in leadership have been the catalyst that provides mutual aid and support to the community by enriching the lives of countless families, preparing future scholars for the academy, and supporting economic and social justice efforts for the betterment of the community (Allen, 1997). Thus, the African-American woman's challenges to leadership cannot be studied against a white hegemonic construct.

Mitchem (2003) asserts that the African-American women's voice has been systematically silenced from the Western-culture perspective of leadership. Moreover, the influence on mainstream leadership literature is to silence the sounds from African-American women; to dismiss her voice, devalue her pain, disengage her voice, or oversimplify the black leadership paradigm in intellectual contexts (Mitchem, 2003). A working definition for social justice for this discourse comes from Lewis (2001). He argues that social justice is a means of "exploring the social construction of unequal hierarchies, which result in a social groups' differential access to power and privilege" (p. 189). The researcher explains that to effectively explore issues

of social justice one must also engage in the deconstruction of unjust and oppressive structures that give power to such constructs as racism and sexism (Lewis, 2001). The purpose of this discussion is to deconstruct the idea that African-American women's experiences should be generalized into the white, hegemonic, mainstream leadership literature and to propose that leadership for social justice is a more accurate depiction of the African-American women's leadership paradigm.

Black Feminism- A Social Justice Discourse

Epistemologies about African-American women from a feminist context began to take shape in the late 1970s, when an emergent group of black women scholars began to challenge the androcentric bias in the literature about black history (Hine, 1992). Groundbreaking work by bell hooks (1981), Deborah Gray White (1985), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) critically discussed the intersection of gender and racism in America. hooks' (1980) *Ain't I a woman : Black women and feminism*, discusses the impact of sexism on the black woman during slavery, the continued devaluation of black womanhood, black male sexism and racism within the feminist movement, and the black woman's involvement in the study of slave women on the plantation. White's (1985) *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* critically analyzed the institution of slavery and critiqued "the stereotypes of Black women as Jezebels, mammies, and Sapphires that revealed the myriad of ways in which our society attempted to devalue and to dehumanize Black women" (Hine, 1992, p. 14). The author posits that African-American women had to develop a culture of "dissemblance and self-reliance in order to survive. They had no choice but to become creative agents for change and to embark upon the heroic task of re-imagining themselves and their sex" (p. 14). Collins' (1990), *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, discusses the oppression of black women by constructs of race, class, and gender within the matrix of domination to control their sexual, economic, and family social structures. The author revisits White's (1985) stereotypes and re-defines the stereotypes of the mammy, the emasculator, the Jezebel, and the welfare mother (Collins, 1990). The rise of black feminist and womanist literature continues to link the past to the present social structures that perpetuate the myriad of obstacles that women of color encounter in the mainstream leadership role. However, early African-American women leaders who overcame these oppressive structures have been traced back to the circum of slavery and the reconstruction.

Navigating Through Social Networks

Early African-American women leaders were developed through social networks such as the church, family, and community structures (Allen, 1997). A culturally relevant theory about African-American women in leadership is directly linked to social justice and education. Allen explains that "black female leadership in the United States is a history of their struggle for liberation from oppression. It is a history of collective struggle to maintain cultural traditions in the black community" (p. 60). Their leadership role in education has historically taken on communal contexts like serving as the community "othermother" caretaker, community spokesperson, entrepreneur, and political activist (Allen, 1997; Collins, 1990).

Smith and Smith (1992) researched the history of early African-American women educational leaders. The earliest known school for slaves was that of Milla Gensen who held clandestine classes after midnight in Natchez, Louisiana. It was there that the matriarchal society of African-American educational administrators began (Smith & Smith, 1992). As more women of color learned to read and write, they began teaching their children, other women, and their children in the community to read and write using the Bible at Sunday School or other religious gatherings. Poor, orphaned, and run-away slave children of the South who came North via the Underground Railroad or other means, were taken in and educated by African-American women who survived the journey North. Early known African-American women educators linked to social justice activism were women such as Catherine Ferguson, who opened one of the first schools for poor children in New York City in 1793; Mary Smith Peake, who opened a school in her home for fugitive slaves in 1847; Jamie Porter Barrett who founded the Palace-of-Delight, a home for children and teens

without shelter; and, Ann Marie Becraft, opened the first seminary boarding school in 1805 for black girls fifteen years old and older in Washington, DC (Smith & Smith, 1992). These early African-American leaders began a long-standing tradition of mending a fragmented culture and rebuilding a people through education.

Cultural Perspectives of Leadership

As African-American women have defined their world from a perspective of resistance, oppression, and creative struggle, they engaged in methods of survival, became community caretakers and role models for other women of color (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Hence, the African-American woman's perspective of leadership tends to differ from her white counterparts. Early in the African-American woman's socialization process, she is taught to value interdependence, mutual aid, spiritualism, reverence for elders, and the tendency to communicate indirectly. Conversely, the Eurocentric cultural perspective values individualism, competition, youth, and communicating in direct terms (Meyers, 2002). As a result, there exists "problematic interactions between the African-American woman and her white colleagues" (Baraka, 1997, p. 237).

Meyers (2002), places more complexity on the leadership role for African-American women by affirming that race and gender (or racism and sexism) are issues inextricably linked as a major obstacle to effective leadership. The author also asserts that race and gender work together to oppress African-American women in the workplace because both perspectives are grounded in stereotypical beliefs and myths about African American women. In the mainstream environment, these "misconceptions and stereotypes about race and sex lead to the treatment of, and interaction with, African-American women as labels; thus mystifying the real persons behind the stigma and encouraging self-fulfilling prophecies about sex and race that hold power" (Meyers, 2002, p. 23).

According to Bush (1999), African-American women have been forced to adopt a Eurocentric norm to survive in the workplace. Furthermore, she states that African-American women "must become bicultural or able to function in two cultures simultaneously, as well as not compromise themselves, their culture, and their inner-self in the process" (p. 22). Furthermore, African-American females are challenged by a "quadruple jeopardy-being black, female, educated, and isolated, is a daily source of stress for the African-American female" (Bush, 1999, p.22).

Re-Constructing a Social Justice Leadership Frame for African-American Women in Leadership

Two major recurring themes in the literature about African-American women in leadership identify key issues that women of color have faced. These include:

Marginalization on two levels

Because the current mainstream literature narrowly contextualizes African-American women's leadership experiences from a white construct of race, it further marginalizes women of color's leadership experiences by generalizing their issues into a single category (Meyers, 2002).

Resistance to leadership by African-American women

This is described within the context of three basic premises, a) sex role stereotyping, b) organizational barriers, and c) the internalization of traditional female behaviors (Moses, 1997; Harvard, 1986). Moses (1997) and Harvard (1986) conclude that sex-role stereotyping and lack of career socialization opportunities result in prejudices and informal rules that deny women equal opportunities for administrative positions in higher education. Women are expected to exhibit behaviors that conform to common societal beliefs about the females' role in the public sphere. Acceptable characteristics include being passive rather than

competitive or self-assertive and submissive rather than independent and dominant (Moses, 1997). On the other hand, women who exhibit socially acceptable behaviors are believed to be lacking in the assertive ambition needed to lead an organization. Moses (1997) argues that another organizational barrier for African-American women in leadership is tokenism. In some instances, women of color who land positional power are often "tokens" who have title but no real political power within the organization to make things happen. Undermined by colleagues and superiors, the African-American woman administrator is under close scrutiny and often set up to fail (Moses, 1997).

Despite the recurring obstacles to leadership, African-American women continue to prevail through a frame that is closely aligned with their early roots in leadership. Jean-Marie (2003) conducted a study to identify the challenges and leadership styles of African-American women administrators in their own words. Participants of the study were administrators at predominately Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's). The vast majority of African-American women in higher education administration are concentrated in HBCU's, where the environment is conducive to professional growth and supportive of their academic and social development (Grimes, 2003).

Jean-Marie (2003) constructed three distinct models of leadership from data gathered from interviews and surveys of African-American women who participated in the study. Participants identified a career model of leadership, embedded in individual achievement; a visionary model of leadership entrenched in economic success; and the social justice model of leadership deeply rooted in uplifting the community (Jean-Marie, 2003). Characteristics of the author's social justice model of leadership for African-American academic administrators include preparing new black scholars to carry on the tradition of the black academic community, interpreting their role as a spiritual vocation that serves the greater good, and providing students with the moral and social assistance needed to ensure their success. Participants in the study also noted that this model of leadership has strong spiritual implications. Administrators frequently compared leadership to a "calling" and attributed their effectiveness and/or success to the guidance of a higher spiritual power that affects their lives in a profound way.

In a study of four African-American women college presidents of minority serving institutions in America, each college president agreed that to be a successful administrator the African-American female must have some key characteristics: personal style and wit, as well as a profound knowledge of the many aspects of higher education administration. She must be an academician, able to win the respect of the faculty and the administrative cabinet leaders; she must be able to gain the respect and support of the external community; and she must never lose sight of the institutional mission of giving students of color access to educational opportunities that can change a generation (Grimes, 2003). By carefully considering the historical and cultural aspects of the African-American woman's leadership paradigm of social justice, there is a distinctive communal model that merits further study. Therefore, social justice, in this reference, re-constructs the idea that the African-American woman's is a model of social justice and empowerment for the community.

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Author

Dr. Mary L. Grimes
2211 Hudson Road, #904
Greer, SC 29650
864-322-5231
mgrimes@scsu.edu

Dr. Mary L. Grimes is the Greenville Center Director and Asst. Professor of Educational Leadership at South Carolina State University. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership with a concentration in higher education from the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Her current research interests include the structural and cultural interception of race, class, and gender on leadership as well as the experiences of women of color in higher education.

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