Black Feminism: An Epistemological Framework for Exploring How Race and Gender Impact Black Women's Leadership Development

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Abstract

This paper presents, through the lens of Black feminism, a historical review of the contextual forces that have shaped and hindered African American's women's leadership development.

Keywords: Black Women, Leadership Development, Black Feminism

Introduction

Anna Julia Cooper, by many accounts is one of the first Black women to speak publicly from a Black feminist platform, although at the time she would not have considered herself performing as such. Cooper, who died in 1964 at what was probably the age of 105, declared herself "the voice of the South." She also declared that she spoke for its Black women, who had only been relatively recently freed from the degradation of legalized slavery when her best-known book *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* was published in 1892 (Palmer, 1990; Rogers, 2005). Scholars consider *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* the first work by an African American feminist. Cooper lived and worked in an era when the fledgling feminist movement in the United States all but ignored the plight of Black women. She also combated the "attitudes of prominent African American men who entertained their own biased views" (Palmer, 1990, p. 447). Hence, Cooper effectively spent her life demonstrating how far Black women could succeed with all things being equal.

In the late 19th century, Cooper spoke about the United States embarking on a new era (the 20th century) and accompanying it would be new opportunities for women, especially Black women. The new opportunities to which she refers are evidenced today—more women are holding positions of leadership in traditionally male professions (i.e., presidents of higher educational institutions, CEOs in corporate America, and elected and appointed government positions). Indeed, Black women have made significant advances, yet still face historic race and gender barriers to reaching their full potential. Cooper (1969) stated,

> [Black] women of to-day occupy [*sic*], one may say, a unique position in this country…her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (p. 92)

Cooper suggested that embarking on the 20th century calls for the recognition of women's greater status in society and that they have and will continue to play a significant leadership role in guiding the country to "greater plains." More specifically, it is through Black women, many as Black feminists, who will be the guiding force in leading the Black community out of subjugation to greater educational, political, and ideological self-empowerment. Thus, this paper explored from a "Black feminist lens" how the confluence of power, race, and gender influences the process through which Black women activists acquire leadership skills. Imbedded in Black women's lived experiences is how they come to leadership, which is characteristically different from the experiences of White women, Black and White men (Allen, 1997; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Collins, 2000). In order to understand this phenomenon and to identify specific actions to take to ensure that those unique experiences do not remain oppressive, it is foremost essential to explore Black women's leadership exhibited during slavery and their emerging leadership and role in the feminist movement.

Black Women and Slavery

Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of the struggle for human and civil rights promulgating their blood, sweat, and tears with the goal of sustaining families, communities, and to building the very foundation upon which the United States is built. Women like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth who were the "titans of the Abolitionist Movement" (Murray, 2000, p. 187) exhibited unbridled leadership qualities (e.g., self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, militancy with an egalitarian spirit, resilience, and spiritual grounding) during a time when Black women's 'womanhood' was being defined and exploited by a racist, sexist, and oppressive patriarchical system of dominance. According to Marble (1990), one decisive form of sexist oppression is the control slave owners had over Black women's reproductive rights although Davis (1983) would contend we are seeing the vestiges of reproductive control even today. Slave owners raped Black female slaves; they were told when and how to have children, subjected to a Eurocentric construction of the "Black female matriarch," and worst yet, were not considered "women." To combat these forces Black women exerted their power through the form of resistance. Sojourner Truth, for example, bared her breasts to prove that she indeed was a woman before an antislavery rally comprised of white women more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Men from the audience yelled back at her that they did not believe she was a woman, which "unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for Black womanhood" cites hooks (1997, p. 22). Later, Truth in her famous 'Ain't I a Woman' speech delivered in Akron, Ohio in 1851 at the second annual convention for the women's right's movement, became one of the first feminists to call attention to the "lot of the Black slave woman, who compelled by circumstance to labor alongside Black men, was a living embodiment of truth that women could be the work-equals of men" (Marble, 1990, p. 198). With respect to racism, Oesterreich (2007) suggested that Black women's struggle for the right to vote is a compelling illustration of the impact of the combined racist and sexist oppression they endured. Black women's source of political powerlessness was attributable to two factors—their positionality in both the Black and female groups which resulted in them having to fight—even in the 21st century—for social, political, and economic parity.

Women such as Tubman—a runaway slave who worked for 12 years to lead over 500 slaves out of the south—Truth, and Cooper "embody and display strength, directness, integrity, and fire. They are not 'ladies' in the genteel connotations of the word: they are 'womanly', without affection or false reticence, and so ideally admirable in the eyes of women today" (Palmer, 1990, p. 449). These women and others shared a vision for freeing Black women's minds and bodies from the clenches of patriarchy. Hooks (1997) wrote that:

> [u]nlike most white women's rights advocates, Tubman, [Truth, Cooper and others] could refer to [their] own personal life experiences as evidence of women's ability to function as a parent; to be the work equal of men; to undergo persecution, physical abuse, rape, torture; and to not only survive but emerge triumphant. (p. 207)

Hence, their legacy indisputably continues to touch the lives of many women today.

Black Women and the Feminist Movement

The history of feminism in the United States is marked by two distinct periods or waves that are directly connected to, and outgrowths of, two key movements in African American history: the abolitionist movement (which culminated with the suffragists securing passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920) and the modern civil rights movement (which peaked with the enforcement, during the 1970s, of Title VII and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). During both of these monumental historical periods and the third wave that followed them, countless numbers of Black women activist developed a feminist consciousness that gave them an agency to strive for empowerment on their own terms (Oesterreich, 2007). Collectively, their feminism was more expansive than the agenda put forth by White women, in that specific social, economic, and political issues facing African American communities were incorporated into a theoretical paradigm that today we call Black feminism (Collins, 2005; Oesterreich, 2007). The ultimate goal of Black feminism is to create a political movement combating the interlocking systems of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, but that also "seeks to develop institutions to protect what the dominate culture has little respect and value for—Black women's minds and bodies" (Taylor, 2001, p. 18).

Ongoing debates exist concerning whether Black—a women's standpoint—should be named womanism or whether Black feminism reflects the basic challenge of accommodating diversity among Black women. In her acclaimed volume of essays, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Alice Walker (1983) introduced four meanings of the term "womanist." According to Walker's first definition, a "womanist" was a "Black feminist or feminist of color" (p. xi). Thus on some basic level, Walker herself uses the two terms as being virtually interchangeable. Like Walker, many African American women see little difference between the two since both support a common agenda of Black women's self-definition and self-determination. As Barbara Omolade (1994) pointed out, "Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the Black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty" (p. xx). Moreover, African American women who use the term Black feminism also attach varying interpretations of this term. As Black feminist theorist and activist bell hooks (1997, p. 198) defined it, feminism is "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full rage of human activities—intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic." Hence, using the term "Black feminism" positions Black women to examine how the particular constellation of issues affecting Black women in the United States are part of issues of women's emancipation struggles globally (Oesterreich, 2007). Moreover, using the term "Black feminism" disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective "Black" challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universalness of this term for both white and Black women. Notably, the term Black feminism makes many African American women uncomfortable because it challenges Black women to confront their own views on sexism and women's oppressions (Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007). Collins stressed:

> that no homogeneous Black woman's standpoint exists. There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic. An essentialist understanding of a Black woman's standpoint suppresses

differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity. Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black woman's collective standpoint does exit, one characterized by tensions that accrue to difference responses to common challenges. (p. 28)

Black Women's Leadership within Race and Gender Oppression

Eurocentric oppressive forces that relegated Black women to subordinate positions in society have unequivocally affected the manner in which their leadership emerged. Black women historically have been forced acquire leadership and power in nontraditional ways in comparison to their male counterparts both black and white. Hence, the emergence of Black female leadership in the United States represents a history of their struggle for liberation from oppression to "lift" the Black community out of racial, economic, and educational subjugation (Hanson, 2003; Rogers, 2005, Rosser-Mims, 2005). Affirming this point, Hill Collins (2000, p. 219) quoted Angela Davis stating in her 1989 book, *Women, Culture, Politics*, "We must strive to 'lift as we climb'…We climb in such a way as to guarantee that all of our sisters and brothers, regardless of social class, and indeed all of our brothers climb with us. This must be the essential dynamic of our quest for power." From a Black feminist analysis, even classical leadership theories and contemporary leadership models have all but ignored Black women's contributions to their communities and impact of the seamless web of class, race, and gender oppression. For example, "Black women have traditionally formed networks that provide the structure for the emergence of their community leadership. Yet, these community structures are often ignored by social scientists in general and community leadership/development specialist in particular" (Allen, 1997, p. 1; Delaney & Rogers, 2004).

Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) conducted research on this very phenomenon however their studies failed to extract Black women's leadership experiences. In their study of gender differences in leadership effectiveness which builds on previous research exploring gender related variables that define women's leadership style from men's, Eagly et al., (1995) found that differences indeed exist between women and men's effectiveness, which is influenced by socially constructed gender roles. The researchers purported that women in general are more effective in leadership roles that are stereotypically feminine and for men; stereotypically masculine roles increase their effectiveness. The researchers acknowledged that various challenges exist to studying "effectiveness" in the context of leadership, especially when conflicting theories are used to explain leader effectiveness. They cited numerous studies that on one end, present evidence suggesting leadership effectiveness is related to socially constructed gender roles, that is, women who exhibit traditional masculine leadership qualities are less effective, while other studies indicate that gender does not impact one's actual effectiveness as a leader. Another set of studies go as far as to suggest that because women still must work twice as hard as men they in the long run effectively benefit from oppressive conditions because over time as more women obtain high-level leadership positions negative perceptions of women's leadership ability diminishes (King & Ferguson, 2001; Parker, 2004; Rosser-Mims, 2005, Thomas, 2004).

Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) stated that it would be irresponsible to generalize their study findings given the lack of consensus that exists around leadership effectiveness. This is at least one indication of their possible awareness of racial differences in women's leadership. The researchers explain that, at best, the only conclusion one can draw from their findings is that "female and male leaders are differentially effective in many settings….and that gender role expectations spill over onto leadership roles within organizations and groups and produce important consequences for the effectiveness of leaders" (p. 140). I concur with the researchers in that paying closer attention to the mechanisms that produce those consequences can be used to help make the barriers to effectiveness less impenetrable for men who lead in feminine defined settings and white women and especially Black women who lead in masculine defined settings.

Since the publication of this study, more research studies have focused on understanding the value of racial and gender diversity in all leadership contexts thus broadening the knowledge base around leadership studies (King & Ferguson, 2001; Parker, 2004; Rosser-Mims, 2005, Thomas, 2004). As our society becomes more ethnically diverse and as more women move into leadership positions traditionally held by men, tremendous implications exist in the area of adult leadership training. Therefore, this study and other related research can assist leadership development specialists designing leadership programs for women and historically underrepresented groups. As evidenced, these theories based on the white male experience attempt to generalize leadership characteristics and as a result do not reflect and devalue Black women and other disadvantaged groups' leadership experiences.

With the help of Black feminist social science scholars, a growing body of literature exists which de-centers traditional sexist and racist leadership literature and places at the center of scholarly discourse Black women's unique leadership experiences, especially the complex process through which they and people of color, in general, come to leadership. Historically, Black women have held positions of leadership in organizations "whose mission is institutional change" (Collins, 1997, p. 23). Moreover, there is evidence showing that Black women activists have held a decidedly different standpoint from the traditional and contemporary conceptions of 'leadership' about the use of power through leadership and the purpose and role of a leader.

> Black women's organizational style within predominantly Black organizations reveals much of how many U.S. Black women exercise power. Understandings of empowerment gained as community othermothers and cultural workers shape Black women's political activities. Drawing on the models of education as empowerment, many Black women routinely reject models of authority based on unjust hierarchies. (Collins, 2000, p. 218)

For example, the leadership style of two renowned Black civil rights activists Septima Clark and Ella Baker carried "distinctive notions of leadership and empowerment into the Black civil rights struggle" whereby they believed the purpose of any leadership is to cultivate and develop more leaders and to promote group solidarity (Allen, 1997, p. 62). Although neither woman held formal positions of authority during the movement, the model of leadership they exercised reveals that they "wielded considerable power within their organizations, which grew from their perspective on social change" (Collins, 2000, p. 34). In so doing, both women challenged the leadership style of Black male dominated organizations where the general belief for some was that Black women could certainly work behind the scenes, but that they should not try to come

forward and lead. Because Black women not only had to contend with sexism from Black men, but also race, sex, and class oppression from white men and women, Black women essentially have been forced to "create safe havens from the hostile work environment that prohibited personal growth and community survival" (Allen, 1997, p. 64; King & Ferguson, 2001; Marble, 1990). Black women, as a result, developed a "culture of political resistance" that required them to "expand their roles as homemakers and laborers to incorporate that of "caretakers' of the race" (Collins, 2000). Black female leadership was therefore cultivated and operationalized by their role in the family and the community (i.e., churches, schools, political organizations) (Delaney & Rogers, 2004; Hanson, 2003). In essence, Black female leadership emerged from and is shaped by both the external and internal forces that affect their everyday experiences.

In the Black leadership literature, no one universal definition exists. However, three themes focused on Black female leadership have emerged in the literature. First, Black female leadership exemplifies survival techniques in family, church and community organizations that encompass the creativity and commitment for group well-being (Allen, 1997; Rogers, 2005, Rosser-Mims, 2005). Secondly, Black female networks, formal and informal, are dynamic and interrelated entities that form a matrix of reinforcements that hold the Black community together while developing leadership for a better future. Lastly, Black female leadership represents the collective experiences and action toward community empowerment. For these reasons, Black women tend to formulate ideas and models that express the reality of their own experiences while opposing the ideology of domination (Allen, 1997; Rogers, 2005; Rosser-Mims, 2005). Consequently, the "term leader is not one that Black women accept readily" (Allen, 1997, p. 62). Moreover, despite the growing awareness of the importance of Black female networks in the Black community scholars still have not provided a definition of Black female leadership. However, Allen (1997) presented the following working definition of Black female community leadership as:

> the struggle for group survival whereby group *collective experience*, and group socio-supports, as well as the instrumental aspects of developing and maintaining internal female networks for institution building, merge to form collective action for cultural maintenance and Black community empowerment. (p. 63)

The underlying message from this definition is that Black women and their male counterparts have the tenable responsibility of ensuring community survival. It is through Black female networks that provide the structure for the emergence of Black women's community leadership. Moreover, Black community survival means, more specifically, that Black female leaders play a vital role in improving the Black community. Even more critical is the Black female networks which are crucial to the "transmission of tradition from generation to generation" (Allen, 1997, p. 64) and that which enables them to work together to combat institutional and social barriers that (e.g., the existing power structure) adversely affects disadvantaged groups. Hence, it is through these networks that Black women's leadership emerges.

Conclusion

Hine and Thompson (1998) stated it best, "more than a story of struggle, Black women's history is very much a story of hope." In the face of great obstacles, Black women strengthen

their communities through their leadership in women's groups, charitable organizations, political groups and their contributions to the larger community as writers, activists, educators, and artists (Hine & Thompson, 1998). As evidenced in the late 19th century, Ida B. Bells, notorious for her crusade against lynching, and educational matriarchs like Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell helped to pave the way for many young Black girls to obtain quality secondary and postsecondary education by founding schools and organizations for the personal and educational development of Black women (Murray, 2000). Literary scholars in the early 19th century, Mary Prince whose work published in 1831, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related to Herself*, and Mary Seacole's 1837 work, *Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole,* were the first Black women to have their works published (Reynolds, 2002). They paved the way for what then followed a 131-year gap before any work by a Black woman was published (Reynolds, 2002). If it were not for these women's leadership, contemporary Black scholars like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Paula Giddings would perhaps have had a longer wait before ascertaining power to shift Black women's lived experienced from the margins to the center of traditional literary scholarship.

Contemporary activist leaders like Rosa Parks who played a fundamental role in sparking the mass struggle for civil rights in the South; Corretta Scott King who carried and continues to carry her husband's legacy into the 21st century; and Shirley Chisholm, the first Black women to make a serious bid for the US presidency in 1970, collectively forced America to no longer ignore and silence the reporting of Black women's experiences, but to acknowledge their plight as manifestations of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. The work of the Black women aforementioned, alone, attests to the intellectual and political contributions Black women have made for equal treatment of Black Americans and for all oppressed groups as well. Although Black women's voices have been silenced for centuries they did not sit idle waiting for the dominate culture to release its hold on their intellectual and political rights. They, instead, from their

> …peculiar coigne of vantage [sat] as quiet observer[s], …whisper[ing] just the needed suggestion or the almost forgotten truth. The [Black] woman, then, should not be ignored because her bark is resting in the silent waters of the sheltered cove…watching the movements of the contestants none the less and is all the better qualified, perhaps, to weigh and judge and advise because not herself in the excitement of the race. (Cooper, 2000, p. 93)

Hence, Black women have and will continue to persevere as they maneuver through the web of sex, race, and even class domination. Analyzing historical accounts of how Black women came to leadership through the prism of Black feminism creates an entirely different picture than the one produced by the dominant culture—a picture of intellectual inferiority and powerlessness. The picture presented from the Black feminist lens, however, not only poignantly reminds us of how the oppressive forces have become institutionalized and thus invisible to the uncritical eye, but also that through education, political activism and engagement on all levels, and group solidarity, Black women and all oppressed groups can continue on and succeed in the fight for radical social, educational, and economic parity.

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Biography

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