



ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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Full Length Research Paper

Beyond the Skin: How African American Women Senior Administrators Describe Their Experiences of Developing an Authentic Leadership Style

Olivia Cook, Miles College, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Executive Director, Center for Economic and Social Justice, ocook@miles.edu

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In this paper, we used a qualitative multiple case study approach. We used the authentic leadership framework (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) to examine how African American women in senior administrator roles, particularly in the president's cabinet, at a member institution of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) in Alabama describe their experiences of developing an authentic leadership style. Following previous studies and recommendations for future research (Davis, 2016; Milner, 2006; Pace, 2017; Robinson, 2017; Wiggs-Harris, 2011), the following research question guides this work: How do African American women senior administrators describe their experiences of developing a leadership style? The results of this study revealed six common themes that are related to the authentic leadership style development of African American women. Code-switching was also an interesting element that emerged from some of the interviews, which may impact how some of them may present themselves and are perceived by others. In relation to the findings, theories of authentic leadership and intersectionality are discussed along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: African American women, authentic leadership, senior administrator

Characteristics such as nice, kind, and compassionate have been commonly ascribed to women (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Sandberg, 2013; Wright, 2017). Although endearing, these characteristics have also contributed to the challenges women face in obtaining leadership positions (Koenig et al., 2011). Due to biased evaluations of women as leaders, there has become a cultural mismatch between women and the perceived demands of leadership characteristics. These communal qualities (i.e. nice and compassionate) have been seen as less fitting when compared to the predominantly agentic qualities such as assertive and competitive, which are believed to be required for the success as a leader. And agentic qualities are also commonly ascribed to more men than women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

According to Koenig et al (2011), "Cultural stereotypes can make it seem that women do not have what it takes for important leadership roles" (p. 616). As a result, over the past two decades, research has sought to explore the experiences of leaders, particularly women, in their ascendancy to senior leadership positions (Milner, 2006; Pace, 2017; Pace, 2018). However, African American women have been left out of the literature on this topic (Carter & Peters, 2016). there are still significant gaps in the literature regarding African American women who hold senior administrator roles in higher education (Davis, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Holmes, 2004). This is partially because the number of African American women in senior leadership positions remains low, whether that be in the public

or private sectors (Pace, 2018), limiting their representation in the literature (Benjamin, 1997).

Scholars suggested that additional research should seek to understand how African American women develop a leadership style (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). As Counts (2012) noted, "these gaps can only be filled with the persistent efforts to gather and record the experiences of Black women, undiluted and unrestrained" (p. 17). To answer the call, this study intends to fill the salient gaps in the literature noted by scholars, which are: 1) exploring how African American women develop a leadership style that is "authentic and true to self," and 2) examining leadership style development of African American women who are senior administrators in higher education institutions. In addition to these stated gaps by other scholars, this study also introduces an unexplored segment of African American women, which are those who are in senior administrator roles at APLU member institutions in Alabama.

This study contributes to understanding the development of leadership styles in African American women by using the following research questions to guide this work:

1. How do African American women senior administrators describe their experiences of developing an authentic leadership style?
2. What factors hinder and help African American women leaders achieve personal and leadership authenticity?

3. How does identity, particularly race and gender, influence the leadership style of African American women leaders?

Literature Review

Scholars note that authentic leadership may have been derived from the studies on transformational leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Yet, when compared to the other leadership theories (i.e. transformational, spiritual, and servant), authentic leadership, a relationally-oriented model, is relatively new in the mainstream leadership literature, “first appearing in the 1990s in the fields of sociology and education” (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, p. 65). Because of its newness, there is not a uniform definition of authentic leadership (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Therefore, Luthans & Avolio (2003), who are typically credited with the starting point of the research on authentic leadership, urge scholars to use a consistent definition to better strengthen its presence in the leadership literature. For this purpose, authentic leadership is

a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development (Luthans & Avolio 2003, p. 243).

Authentic leaders enact roles and display leadership characteristics on the basis of their values, convictions, beliefs, and what they believe to be true as they have experienced them to be true. Through self-awareness and self-regulated behaviors, authentic leaders look within to gain self-meaning and to determine the type of leader they desire to become (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). By revisiting their life stories, authentic leaders are able to construct, develop, and revise their leadership characteristics in a reflective way that remains true to self, which helps create a positive energy and meaning for their followers (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

To study authentic leadership development, there have been instruments developed such as the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Copyright © 2007 by Bruce J. Avolio, William L. Gardner, and Fred O. Walumbwa) and the Authentic Leadership Inventory (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011) to empirically study this theory. However, there are not many of qualitative studies that provide an in-depth examination of this concept (Robinson, 2017). This is important because due to the “unique stressors facing organizations throughout the world today [there is a] call for a renewed focus on what constitutes genuine” guidance, or authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 316). And in particular, what constitutes the development of authentic African American women leaders (Pace, 2017, Pace 2018, Robinson, 2017 & Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2017).

Authentic leadership relates to African American women leaders in a number of different ways. First, because they are known to be caring, supportive, considerate, true to themselves, and inclusive to others in the room (Wiggs-Harris, 2011). They tend to develop traits such as independence, resiliency, and autonomy that allow them to be self-aware and self-confident to provide sound direction (Pace, 2017). Second, how these leaders feel they are perceived by their followers. African American women leaders are conscious of their actions and how they influence their subordinates (Parker, 1996). This is a key aspect as it is important that leaders be virtuous, “otherwise they cannot inspire trust and have true followers” (Silva, 2014, p. 2). Third, through genetics and environmental influences molding them to be authentic to themselves as well as those around them (Illies et al., 2004; Arvey et al., 2006). Fourth, through parenting influences. In African American families, their mothers teach them how to be self-confident, determined, bicultural, independent, and their true self “because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women” (Wade-Gayles, 1984, p. 2). Therefore, African American women developing an authentic leadership style is important and is often true to self as well as “similar to the style exhibited by an important and admired early influence such as a parent” (Hartman & Harris, 1992, p. 164). 5) Fifth, through mentorship. Research has found that African American women in executive positions not only have many mentors, but the “data indicate that Black women cross gender and race boundaries to create resource relationships” and build their level of cultural competence (Parker, 1996, p. 198). In other words, African American women seek mentorship from people that look like them as well as those who do not, creating a foundation of trust, transparency, openness, and awareness, which are all characteristics of authentic leadership.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the *development* of the leadership style, African American women embrace, a more inclusive framework is desired, which is why authentic leadership serves as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Gardner et al.’s (2005, p. 6) model entitled, *The Conceptual Framework for Authentic Leader and Follower Development* they describe how there is both authentic leadership and authentic followership development. And both of these aspects consist of two fundamental components, which are self-awareness and self-regulation. However, prior to both, there are antecedents, such as personal history and trigger events, to authentic leadership style development (Gardner et al., 2005). For this study, the focus is on authentic leadership development. In particular, the antecedents (personal history and trigger events) as well as identity, which is an element of self-awareness.

Personal history consists of the stories that provides the leaders with a “meaning system” (Turner & Mavin, 2008). This “meaning system” may include “family influences and role models, early life challenges, educational and work experiences” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 6). The “meaning system” lays the

foundation for the leader to act in certain ways that gives a person's actions particular meaning, whereas trigger events are oftentimes dramatic, subtle changes in a person's circumstance that encourages personal growth and development (Gardner et al., 2005; Turner & Mavin, 2008). Trigger events can be internal or external that challenge the leader, which may require an unconventional solution. For the leader, these can be seen as catalysts that increase their sense of self-awareness (Gardner et al., 2005).

According to Gardner et al., (2005) self-awareness is "an attention state where the individual directs his or her conscious attention to some aspect of the self" (p. 7). Within this idea of self-awareness there are several components that attribute to it, which are values, identity, emotions, and motives/goals. For this research, identity is also examined, particularly race and gender, as to whether it contributes to their authentic leadership style development. Race and gender are primary identifiers because of the lack of research on African American women, especially in relation to the deep history of land-grant institutions in Alabama (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Geiger, 2017; Miller, 2019). Related to socially constructed groups, identity can influence the leader to consider the meaning, value, significance, and reputation of each group (Collins, 1998). In other words, identifying with certain groups may encourage or discourage the authentic leadership development process (Gardner et al., 2005).

Intersectionality

In addition to the authentic leadership framework, it is pertinent to involve intersectionality to further explain the multiple aspects of their identity. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is the interconnection of a social categorization by race, gender, class, nationality and etc. as they apply to groups or individuals, creating overlapping systems that bring

disadvantages or discrimination (See also, Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). This is important to include in this discussion as intersectionality refers to people being affiliated with more than one social group (Collins, 1998; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Robinson, 2017). For example, those who identify as being a woman and African American are a part of more than one socially constructed group.

African American women, or better yet, women of color, succumb to many complexities that are quite different from their Caucasian female counterparts. For white women, sexism is a primary factor that results in discrimination from senior administrator positions (Robinson, 2017). However, other than gender discrimination being one of the key foci for African American women, they also find themselves subjected to battle racial discrimination as well (Suyemoto & Ballou, 2007). This is largely because the skin color of white women is typically the same as that of many of the male leaders so their race, background, and ethnicity are often overlooked. However, this is not the same for African American women as they can possibly experience gender discrimination from being a female and racial

discrimination from being black. As Szymanski & Lewis (2016) argue, it is vitally important to include intersectionality in the discussion when exploring experiences as gender and racial discrimination are relevant to African American women.

There is intense discussion in the field of whether or not intersectionality should be categorized as a theory, approach, perspective, concept or nothing at all. Because of this, scholars like Else-Quest & Hyde (2016) urge researchers to go beyond using a specific method when discussing intersectionality. Instead, they argue a more in-depth examination to understand the complexities of a person's identity. Therefore, although intersectionality is not used as the theoretical basis for this study, primarily because of discussion as to if it is a theory or not, it is included to further analyse the experiences of African American women in senior administrator positions.

Methods

To conduct this research, a qualitative multiple case study approach is used in an effort to gain a more in-depth understanding on the experiences of African American women in senior level positions, particularly in the president's cabinet, at an APLU member institution in the State of Alabama (Yin, 2014).

A qualitative design provides a comprehensive understanding of an understudied population of the leadership literature (Yin, 2014). Following previous research (Robinson, 2017 & Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2017), case studies are needed because they provide descriptive understanding of an event or phenomenon (Brady & Collier, 2010), and are useful when several individuals are chosen to participate in the study (Stake, 1995). Using case studies helps practitioners understand the historical components behind developing a leadership style. For researchers, a case study provides thick description and a deeper understanding of what is happening, why it is happening, and how to address it. It also helps both practitioners and researchers see how the type of leadership style makes a difference. They are dynamic in regard to external validity, and they do not disrupt the preexisting research setting allowing the researcher to examine intact groups as they are (Brady & Collier, 2010).

In addition to this, Yin (2009) argues that "case studies are the preferred method used when how or why questions are being posed and when the focus is on real-life context" (p. 11). Therefore, the use of the multiple case study approach is appropriate because of the why and how questions that surround the leadership style development of African American women (Robinson, 2017). Yin (2014) notes that "the more your questions seek to explain some present circumstance, how or why some social phenomenon work, the more that case study research will be relevant" (p. 4). To conduct the case studies, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Following prior research (Weatherspoon-Robinson 2013 and Robinson 2017), the following ten interview questions were designed to frame the answer to the guiding research question:

1. How would you describe your leadership style?

2. What experiences led you to develop your style of leadership?
3. As you advanced to your position, how did mentorship, if at all, play a role in your process?
4. In what ways do you find your leadership style an asset to your abilities to lead?
5. In what ways, if any, do you find your style a hindrance in your abilities to lead?
6. Do you think your childhood experiences and your parents' approach to leadership influenced how you lead today? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. What are your most fulfilling experiences in your role as a senior level administrator?
8. What are your most challenging experiences in your role as a senior level administrator?
9. Do you believe your gender influences your leadership style? If so, in what ways?
10. Do you believe your race influences your leadership style? If so, in what ways?

Data Collection

The recruitment process employed was sending emails to all thirteen African American women senior administrators at an APLU member institution in Alabama at the time of the study. APLU consists of higher education institutions located in the United States that have been designated by the respective state to receive the benefits from the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (Miller, 2019). Currently, there are seven institutions a part of APLU in Alabama: (a) Alabama A&M University, (b) Auburn University, (c) Tuskegee University, (d) The University of Alabama, (e) The University of Alabama at Birmingham, (f) The University of Alabama in Huntsville, and (g) University of South Alabama (Miller, 2019). APLU member institutions located in Alabama were chosen to examine because of the lack of research on the African American women leaders at these institutions.

Each of the participants a part of the study is in the president's cabinet and represent various different roles at their respective institution (i.e., presidents, vice presidents, general counsels, and chief officers). After the individuals agreed to be participants in the study, a telephone consultation was arranged to screen each woman. Following Robinson's (2017) study, for each African American woman to participate in this research, they had to affirmatively answer the following questions:

1. Are you an African American woman at least 30 years of age?
2. Have you held a senior leadership position for at least 5 years?

The African American women who met the criteria and wanted to participate in the study received a follow-up email with a consent form attached to print, sign, and return via electronic email, United State Postal Service, or fax machine. Once the form was received and reviewed, an in- person or telephone

interview was scheduled. Participants were at least 30 years of age.

Data Analysis

In qualitative case study research, data are analysed by obtaining rich, detailed description of each case. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, and sent to each participant to ensure the transcription is accurate, which is a process commonly referred as member checking (Yin, 2014). The participants were asked to review the transcript, acknowledge any needed changes, or approve as is. If there were changes that need to be made, the participant was asked to note them within the document and return the amended file to the researcher. Once reviewed, changes were made based on the participant feedback. If there were no changes that needed to be made, the participants were asked to reply back indicating the transcript accurately captures what they said.

Once all transcripts were deemed accurate by the participants, a within-case and cross-case analysis of the data was completed using Nvivo® 12 for Mac. This computer software helps to analyze unstructured and non-numerical data by organizing, sorting and arranging information in a coherent fashion that produces easy to read reports and visuals for the researcher to analyze. During this process, the data go through three rounds of coding (Brown & Hale, 2014). First, open coding, which is the first run through that consists of making a list of all possible themes (Strauss, 1987). Second, axial coding, which uses the themes, noted frequency, added additional themes if necessary, and determined if some of the initial themes needed to be collapsed (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Last, selective coding, which is where the researcher looks for quotes or examples that illustrate the theme.

Pseudonyms were given to each participant to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and the integrity of the study as well as abide by all guidelines of the IRB. This means the interviewee for the first interview will be referred to as Participant 1, and so on.

Findings and Interpretation of the Results

The themes that emerged from the experiences of how these African American women senior administrators developed as authentic leaders were explicated from the text in an effort to understand the development process. The participants in the study confirmed that they do describe their development process as being authentic and one that has evolved over time. Their style has morphed as they have ascended to their senior leadership position where many of them embrace a transformational leadership style. As displayed in Table 1, the findings also show that mentoring and understanding and connecting with people are some of the primary factors that help African American women leaders achieve personal and leadership authenticity. In addition to this, the way they identify, in terms of race and gender, also have influence in their leadership development process. Table 1 provides a clear review of the themes that emerged from the interviews, which is

followed by greater discussion to gain deeper insight into each theme.

Table 1

Leadership Style Development of African American Women Senior Administrators at APLUs in Alabama

Pseudonym	Preferred Transformational Leadership Style	Qualities Modeled by Parents	Understanding and Connecting with People	Impact of Gender and Race	Mentorship is a Priority	Authentic and true to self
Participant 1	X	X	X		X	
Participant 2	X	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 3	X	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 4	X	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 5		X	X	X	X	X
Participant 6	X		X		X	X
Participant 7	X	X	X		X	X

Description: Table 1 displays themes the many factors that African American women consider in their role as senior level administrators and developing a leadership style that is authentic and true to themselves.

Theme One: Preference to Operate within a Transformational Leadership Style

Six of the seven participants described a transformational style of leadership or verbally said they preferred a transformational leadership style. This style was largely preferred because of some of the work they do and types of positions they are in. A few of them were diversity and inclusion officers, and they expressed how a lot of the work they do is transformative work due to culture shifts, generation changes, climate issues and being in an institutional setting, where new strategic goals often emerge. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I would say transformational because...I think as a leader you have to see the end-goal, you have to see something greater and beyond our day-to-day operations.” This was a shared theme by all of the participants, where six out of the seven agreed that embodying a transformational leadership style in their role is salient and helps them advance the needle in their role of work as well as ascend to top positions.

Theme Two: Qualities Modeled by Parents

Six out of the seven leaders said the style of leadership they have preferred to use in the workplace was modeled by both or one of their parents. Because of this direct influence, the participants modeled their styles off of many of them and wished to emulate those characteristics. Study participants disclosed that their parents provided them with a level of independence and showed them how to be resilient, developmental and understanding of people in their thoughts as well as their actions. Participant 1 indicated that:

So, one of the things that my dad...my parents taught me that I was upset about growing up, but I value so much right now is independence. And they really allowed us room and space to learn on our own and make decisions on our own.

And they gave us a great amount of trust in order for us to have a safe place where we could fall.

Many of the qualities the participants described their parents embodying are ones they observed, admired and wished to emulate in their own leadership style development process. Those memorable moments they experienced with their parents remained with them, in particular the supportiveness, encouragement and, when possible, engagement in the decision-making process.

Theme Three: Understanding and Connecting with People

While the qualities embodied by their parents or direct supervisors heavily influenced their leadership style development, the participants also discussed how understanding, connecting, motivating, valuing and developing relationships with people are vitally important. They each described how important it is to be people oriented as they have advanced to their position. For Participant 6, the human connection was and still is an essential component in her line of work. When reflecting on her personal experiences of how she found her passion and obtained her role, she shared, “As much as I loved numbers and I loved data, I felt like what was missing for me was the people interaction.”

Many of them proclaimed how the interaction with people has taught them more about themselves as well as how to lead better. However, although people are important and getting to know others is principal when developing as a leader, many noted that there are times when those relationships are challenging in the process. Many of the participants noted how getting through to people can be hard but is worth it when developing as a leader.

Theme Four: Impact of Gender and Race on African American Women’s Leadership Style

Four out of the seven leaders stated that their identity, particularly their race and gender, impact their leadership style in regard to how they feel they are perceived by others as leaders. They shared how leading by example and empowering those they were to lead were both vitally important because being African American and a woman increased their awareness in the importance of both aspects. For example, when sharing a story about her identity in the leadership development process, Participant 2 professed:

I have never had the luxury of saying my race is inhibiting my ability to lead. What I have been clear about is early on in my career, and maybe stridently so, sharing with those to whom I reported directly, two things that were important to me. [First], I want the same feedback as you give the white guys, because if I don't get it, I am unable to grow and develop, and you have my permission to give me that feedback. Secondly, let's not go establishing rules for African Americans that don't exist for white folk.

Participant 5 also shared that both have an effect in her role but more often than none it is her gender that is a bit more salient. Nonetheless, each of the participants shared how instances of gender and/or race have impacted their leadership style development. In knowing that they are both black and a woman, each of them discussed how they have recognized the distinct characteristics of the two and how they inform identity, regardless of if they have accepted both in being influencers to their leadership style development.

Theme Five: Mentorship is a Priority

Mentorship was highly important to all of the participants in the study. Each of them felt like this was a crucial part of their leadership journey and part of the reason why they have adapted their particular leadership style. Many of their mentors were oftentimes their direct supervisors, previous college professors or someone who simply reached out to them to let them know they were doing someone right or wrong. In the workplace, their supervisor largely served as their mentor and influenced many of them tremendously. According to Participant 6, having a mentor was "Major... And most of the times the mentorships were more informal." She noted that she never asked anyone to necessarily be a mentor to her, it was those relationships that were not planned or people simply giving her advice that meant a lot to help in her process. When describing one of those informal mentor relationships with a male colleague she recalled,

He gave me a piece of advice that I remember often, he said "When you ask for a seat at the table you have to bring more to the table than a fork." He said, "Because if all you are bringing is a fork to get from the table, and you're not putting anything on the table... eventually, we're going to get tired of feeding you.

For Participant 6, this was a pivotal moment for her with her mentor, which influenced her outlook on process. Participant 1 also had an instrumental male mentor to help her in her process as well. When asked about her mentor, she confessed:

Oh, I never would be here today without mentors. That's exactly how I got where I was today and how I got started in the field actually.

In sum, each of the seven participants undoubtedly explained how mentorship has played a vital role in their trajectory to their leadership position as well as their leadership development process. Although many of them acknowledged a few women leaders, majority of the participants mentioned male leaders as being their primary mentors and helping them along their journey mainly because of the roles in which they aspired to obtain oftentimes were filled by males. Therefore, for them to ascend to a higher leadership position they sought direct mentorship from the male leaders they saw and had access to, which was a key priority for their development.

Theme Six: Authentic and True to Self

Six out of the seven participants described their leadership style as being authentic and true to self. The majority of them noted how their leadership style has indeed evolved overtime, often making adjustments when needed, but it is overall highly reflective of who they are as a person, as a human being. When probed about their authenticity, each of them paused and thought deeply about the question, signifying an intentional introspective response to the question. Participant 2, noted:

You know, on some level it is hard to do diversity and inclusion work well and not feel like you are being true to yourself. So, my answer to that question is yes, I bring my whole self to work knowing that for me, that I have to be able to look myself into the mirror and know that I am doing my work with a modicum of integrity, that I expect from me.

Most of the participants in this study are consistent with the research on authenticity and the African American women leadership style development process. The participants in this study shared how the importance of being self-aware of their values, morals, and beliefs are foundational to their process of becoming a leader.

Conclusion, Limitations, Future Implications, and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this research study reinforced the examination from the literature on this subject from previous research (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Turner & Mavin, 2008; Dawson, 2015) using the life stories approach in an effort to explain how leaders develop a strong, positive self-awareness and self-concept that undergird the authentic leadership development process. This study's findings involve six overarching areas that are meaningful to the authentic leadership development of African American women senior administrators.

Theme One: Preferred Transformational Leadership Style

The participants in this study preferred a transformational leadership style. According to Burns (1978), a transformational leader can encourage a follower to search beyond their own self

goals to achieve a larger organizational goal. They provide their followers with authentic wants, needs, aspirations and long-term goals that they can identify with. In relation to past research on this topic, the findings are consistent with prior research in the field (Benjamin, 1997; Byrd & Campbell, 2010; Stanley, 2009; Parker, 2005). For example, in a mixed-methods study by Campbell (2010) on eighteen African American women administrators of the 1890 Land-Grant Cooperative Extension system, she examined the relationships between personal, professional characteristics, and leadership style preferences. Many of the African American women involved in the study were from mostly southern states. Her surveys and interviews affirmed that African American women prefer a transformational leadership style more often than a transactional leadership style. When analyzing the data from the majority of the participants in this study, the same can be said for them as well.

Theme Two: Qualities Modeled by Parents

For majority of the participants, both or one of their parents modeled an appropriate leadership style for them to embody. Many of the participants shared how the qualities modeled by their parents in their childhood shaped their leadership style and how they began to lead later in life. For example, in Davis & Maldonado's (2015) qualitative study, they conducted semi-structured interviews as well with senior level academic executives (i.e., presidents, vice presidents or deans) at both four-year and two-year colleges. They found that the women in their study often referenced parents and family members who provided strong guidance and support, which has profoundly impacted their leadership development process. Similarly, this statement can be said for the participants in this study. This is also consistent with previous research on this topic, as this theme provides evidence on how those values, initial teachings and learnings of a leader begin in the home, primarily with the parents.

Theme Three: Impact of Gender and Race on African American Women Leadership Style

The intersection of gender and race on the African American women leaders is important to understand when assessing the leadership style development process of these individuals. This finding is consistent with research from scholars like Davis and Maldonado (2015) as they found that for African American women, there is an impact of race and gender on their leadership styles as they have advanced in their careers. When the spheres of race, gender, and other identity groups interact, they shape social realities and inform the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of African American women (Parker, 2005). For majority of the participants in this study, race and gender mattered and have influenced their leadership style which is why these constructs should be treated as parallel as these identifiable characteristics can play a role in the leadership development process for African American women leaders (Parker, 2005).

Theme Four: Understanding and Connecting with People

Additionally, the participants noted how understanding and connecting with people is important in their professional and personal development process. Each of them noted how relationships are important, often referencing how they help them learn more about themselves and how they are to lead others. In other words, their relationship with people formed the centerpiece of their thoughts about leadership. In Waring's (2003) study on African American female college presidents, she found that their conceptions of leadership, such as decision-making, was grounded in the understanding of people and what they need. She stated that "Most of the women report that they are concerned about the relationships because attending to relationships makes them better leaders" (Waring 2003, p. 40). In understanding and connecting with people, decision-making and responsibility are also more likely to be decentralized, where many of the participants may agree that their democratic leadership style may emerge. Therefore, this finding is also consistent with the mainstream literature on leadership, particularly emotional intelligence, and the importance of why leaders, not necessarily African American women, should aspire to have genuine connection with people to lead them more effectively.

Theme Five: Mentorship is a Priority

Each participant overwhelmingly shared how having a mentor in their lives was instrumental to their leadership development process as well as ascending the ladder to their senior leadership position. Oftentimes this mentor was a peer or supervisor and for some of them the relationship was informal. Studies have shown that African American women who seek to obtain high-level positions are often in need of support to get there (Counts, 2012; Davis, 2016; Robinson, 2017). These mentors, especially those early on in the career, are seen to be influential in the professional success of these women. Each of the participants in this study provided a narrative on a particular mentor and how this mentor shaped their style, taught them how to lead, and ultimately, influenced their career trajectory. According to Davis and Maldonado (2015), "Establishing strategic relationships in the academy is a valuable tool for African American women to gain access to higher-level promotions and career opportunities" (p. 60). In other words, having access to mentors helps these women navigate the leadership structure in their institution (Pace, 2017). Therefore, the findings from this research reinforce the literature on this subject, underlying the importance of mentorship when career advancement is a goal.

Theme Six: Authentic and True to Self

According to Avolio and Gardner (2005), authentic leadership relates to an African American woman's leadership development process in the leader's awareness of self, how she believes she is perceived by others, and how she intentionally employs leadership based on those precepts. This is an entirely reflective process, as well as subjective process, that is experienced by the individual. This means, if the individual believes they are being authentic, then by definition, they are (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Eriksen, 2009).

The majority of the participants in this study are consistent with the research on authenticity and the African American women leadership style development process (Davis, 2016; Eagly, 2005; Robinson, 2017). The participants in this study shared how the importance of being self-aware of their values, morals, and beliefs are foundational to their process of becoming a leader.

Additionally, an aspect from a few of the interviews that emerged in relation to being authentic was code-switching, which is a term often used in the study of linguistics (Nelson, 1990). According to Scott (2000), code switching, introduced by Einar Haugen in 1954, is when someone operates between multiple languages by shifting the language they use or the way they express themselves in certain conversations. However, as of late the definition has since expanded to capture all the ways in which people adjust communication and expression based on their audience (Nelson, 1990). Many have described this as a tool in which people of color use to navigate white spaces (Cross & Strauss, 1998; DeBose, 1992). To explore this phenomenon more, a follow up, or expanded study on this topic plans to provide more insight into this as it relates to this particular group.

Limitations

For this design, there are three distinct limitations to be aware of: inability to generalize, social desirability, and researcher bias. First, generalizability is a limitation (Brady & Collier, 2010). Due to the primary focus of this research being African American women at an APLU member institution in Alabama, the study cannot be generalized to other races or ethnicities. The second limitation is social desirability (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2013). This affects the research because the participants may be untruthful in reporting her own leadership characteristics in an effort to please society as well as herself. Last, researcher bias (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2013) is a limitation to this study. Through using purposeful sampling, the researcher intentionally chose African American women leaders who are senior administrators at an APLU member institution in Alabama to be a part of the case studies. Because of this, discretion was given to the researcher as to who was included in the study. Therefore, researcher bias can potentially be present due to the autonomy of the researcher being able to select the participants to be included in the study. These limitations were sacrificed in an effort to add African American women in senior roles at an APLU member institution in the leadership literature. As Counts (2012) notes, it is through these rich examinations “that the tapestry of a rich leadership history can be woven” (p. 17).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study can inform both institutional and organizational leaders on diversity training programs that can possibly increase awareness of the different biases and stereotypes that are placed on underrepresented groups. These diversity training programs could focus on inclusion practices, unconscious bias awareness, positive employee interaction, and strategies on how to advance to senior leadership positions

(Counts, 2012; Weatherspoon- Robinson, 2013). The findings could be used as a reference point for all sectors who seek to eliminate cultural barriers and obstacles that can stunt the upward mobilization of African American women in their organizations.

This information can potentially be crucial to institutional leaders when recommending leadership and mentorship programs that can help those that are seeking higher positions in the academy (Counts, 2012). Offering diverse leadership training programs can be useful to the organizational culture as the promotion of knowledge can potentially foster health working relationships and increase cultural competency amongst levels amongst workers (Weatherspoon- Robinson, 2013).

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the foundational research in this field and the results from this study, there is still more research needed to explore the leadership style development of African American women. To do this, first, scholars should look to explore the effects of intersectionality and leadership style development. In this study, studying intersectionality revealed how the experiences of African American women leaders must be understood not only in terms of race and gender, but other aspects must be considered as well (Chin, Desormeaux, & Sawyer, 2016). Many of the participants noted how there are other components that contribute to the leadership style development process. Therefore, including culture, spirituality, relationships, age, nationality and other identities may be salient to research in future studies. In Wiggs-Harris’ (2011) piece, she found that “For African American women leaders and other individuals of color, leadership socialization and development of self-concept are influenced by their gender, racial, cultural, and spiritual identities” (p. 4). When considered interdependently, intersectionality may be useful to further explain how multiple identities may reinforce each other and enhance the leadership style development of African American women. Simply put, more studies are needed to better understand this phenomenon and the different groups African American women may identify with.

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