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## **Theorizing African American Women's Leadership Experiences: Socio-Cultural Theoretical Alternatives**

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### *Abstract*

Leadership is generally associated with an individual being in a position of authority, and holding a certain measure of power and influence within an organization. However, for African American women (AAW) in predominantly white organizations, race, gender, and social class may restrict the process of leadership. Rather than being mechanisms of leadership, power and influence may be means of restricting AAW's leadership authority over others.

Whites often use their privilege to circumvent, diminish, overrule, and control the actions of blacks in the workplace (Deitch et al., 2003). Even blacks in positions of leadership are subject to having their authority undermined. King and Ferguson (1996) suggest the presence of AAW as leaders in predominantly white organizations is in itself ambiguous in that these roles are beyond the customary expectations for black women. Although the number of AAW leaders in predominantly white organizations is increasing (Catalyst, 2004), the dilemma remains that socially constructed hierarchies of race, gender, and social class together may serve to disempower the process of leadership (Collins, 1999).

Furthermore, AAW's marginalized status may limit access to social connections in predominantly white organizations. Access to power as well as the freedom to exercise one's own power and authority often lies in informal social networking systems (Gostnell, 1996). Lack of access to these systems may disadvantage the AAW leader's ability to influence organizational processes and actions.

Many of the experiences that AAW face in predominantly white organizations are not located within separate spheres of race, gender, or social class (Crenshaw, 1989). Rather these independent spheres converge and form an interlocking system that shapes structural and political aspects of individual experience not captured within mainstream leadership discourse. Furthermore, this interlocking system can intersect with the presumed right of the African American woman leader to exercise power and influence over persons of the dominant culture. Collins (1998) refers to AAW as being *outsiders-within* – a status of disempowerment within interactive systems of power, race, gender, and social class.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate new conversations on leadership theory and the socio-cultural perspectives that AAW leaders lend to the conversation. The goal is to suggest alternative theories and encourage theory building research that are useful for informing the challenges to leadership in respect to the race, gender and social class of the leader.

Key Words: Women, leadership, African American women

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*Beginning the Conversation-Dorothy's Story*

Dorothy, an African American female, is a senior manager in a predominantly white organization and the only African American manager in the organization, recalls a difficult period during her professional career. Over a period of time, Dorothy observed how (white) employees under her authority went around her, rather than approach her to challenge, question, resist, or attempt to override decisions she made.

Dorothy gives the example of her administrative assistant, a white woman, who was on a social level with the head of the department, a white male. According to her job description the assistant reported directly to Dorothy, although she was hired without Dorothy's input. From the beginning the assistant demonstrated no real loyalty to Dorothy; often thwarting any efforts Dorothy made to implement new ideas if she saw a "better" way to do things. The assistant routinely went over Dorothy's head and was often successful in having Dorothy's instructions to staff changed or overturned. Each time she addressed the assistant's actions with the department head, Dorothy was made to appear as overreacting or made to appear a troublemaker who could not get along with other people.

By nature of her status within the organizational hierarchy, Dorothy's position symbolized authority. But in many instances, Dorothy felt her authority was in name only and as such afforded her limited voice even in areas within her leadership domain. The social relationship Dorothy's assistant had with the department head extended to settings outside the workplace. In light of this, Dorothy felt she was socially disadvantaged for entering this circle--an outsider within. These types of situations were frequent sources of frustration and confusion for Dorothy. Although her primary source of confusion came from experiencing the contradiction of having the power and influence in the process of leadership in her organization and having no one to offer an explanation for why the contradiction existed.

*Statement of the Problem*

Leadership has been studied primarily from the perspective of traditional, mainstream leadership discourse based on the experiences of white men (Parker, 2005). As a result, there is a lack of understanding of how social power, dominance and control interacts with AAWs' leadership (Allen, 1995). Black feminists and scholars (Hooks, 1990; Collins, 1990; Sternweis & Wells, 1992) have studied AAW from a sociological perspective, but many questions are raised when AAW are studied as leaders in predominantly white organizations. For this reason, research and theory is needed to explain how the historically marginalized status of AAW leaders in terms of race, gender, and social class interacts with power and influence in these settings. To gain an understanding, theories that inform the process of leadership, as well as theory building research, needs to address the social and cultural challenges that may confront AAW leaders. Towards this end, the following inquiry is made:

How do traditional, mainstream theories of power and influence inform (or not inform) the experiences of AAW in positions of leadership in predominantly white organizations?

*Defining Key Terms*

The key terms used in this article are: African American women, leadership, intersectionality (race, gender, social class), power, influence, and authority. These terms are defined as follows. African American women refers to women who, by self-definition, view themselves as being a black woman (Delany & Rogers, 2004) born in the U. S. with traces or direct lineage to African ancestry. The term African American women may be used interchangeably with black women. For the purposes of this discussion African American women will be the preferred reference. Leadership is a process whereby an “individual influences a group of people to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2004, p. 2). Leadership is not only a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader; it can also be conceived as an event, process, or relationship between leader and follower. Intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race, gender, and class interact to shape the multiple dimensions of AAW’s experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Race is generally understood as a socially constructed category to denote differences among people and is politically sustained to assign people to categories (Banton, 2000). Gender is not only a biological categorization; it is a “set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men” (Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p.16). Social class determines one’s access to networks and resources that influence success and social privilege. Power refers to the leader’s authority or control to direct or influence others and the ability to influence a change in behavior (Noe, 2002). Power is “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his (or her) own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber, 1947, p. 152). In organizations, power can be associated with the leader’s influence to facilitate change. Influence is the power to shape policy or ensure favorable treatment from someone based on status (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2005). Similarly authority is the power or right to give orders or make decisions. A person having authority has administrative power, control, and the power to influence others (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2005). Authority is generally accepted based on a person’s position without being publicly questioned or challenged by others within the organization.

*The Significance of Theory*

Theory is used to understand and offer solutions to complex problems. According to Lynham (2002), the application of a theory to a problem, issue, or phenomenon links the theory to the world of practice. The application of theory guides further inquiry and understanding of the theory in action. Furthermore, the application of theory to real world context becomes a fundamental source of knowledge or ongoing development of theory (Ruona & Lynham, 1999). In organizations, leaders use different perspectives, or frames, to help understand situations, problems, and daily activities in the workplace. A drawback to solving problems may be when problems relate to people and the theories we have to draw upon are not necessarily universal nor can be generalized to all people, situations, and circumstances.

The ability (or inability) to apply traditional leadership theory to AAW leaders in predominantly white organizations may present a need to re-evaluate traditional theory in respect to practical application in these settings. Lynham (2002) refers to the ongoing refinement and development of a theory to ensure it continues to be relevant and useful in the workplace. When the theory is no longer valid or useful in action, it should be adapted or discontinued. In light of this, we might ponder whether existing theories of leadership are applicable to all or only a portion of those engaging in the process of leadership.

Gioia and Pitre (1990) described theory as “a coherent description, explanation and representation of observed or experienced phenomena” (p. 587). Theories have a practical role in our organizations, just as they do in our everyday lives. In the organizational context theories inform the phenomenon of leadership. According to Lynham (2000), the study of theory is undertaken for producing new knowledge about the world. Theories help leaders “to understand, explain, anticipate, know, and act in the world in better and more informed ways and to better ends and outcomes” (p. 222). Torraco (1997) identified several ways that theory is useful in developing an organization’s human resources. Among these are: a) responding to new problems which have no previously identified solution, b) reinterpreting old data and giving it new meaning, c) identifying new issues and research questions that need to be answered, and d) guiding and informing research and improving professional practice.

Bell and Nkomo (1992) argued that merely questioning the applicability of leadership theory to the race, gender, and social class of the leader undermines the assumption that universal organization and management theories exist. By bringing to the conversation new and previously silenced voices, we can move beyond questioning and begin to challenge orthodox theories of this social phenomena, shifting leadership knowledge from a deterministic-individualistic paradigm to a more reflexive, non-deterministic and collective one, pushing the notion of leadership to new heights of understanding and bringing us closer to an alternative worldview of leadership (Allen, 1995).

*Theories of Power and Influence.* A basic assumption of power and influence theories is that “the power possessed by the leader is important not only for influencing subordinates, but also for influencing peers, superiors, and people outside the organization” (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992, p. 160). Therefore, effective leadership is based on the successful use of power and influencing processes to achieve certain goals. However, we might argue how the leader’s exercise of power might be constrained or limited based on followers’ perceptions of the leader’s race, sex, and social class. Two theoretical perspectives of power and influence will be examined: French and Raven’s (1959) bases of power, and Graen’s (1976) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory.

*Theory signifying the legitimate power of a leader.* French and Raven (1959) proposed five bases of a leader’s power: legitimate, referent, expert, reward, and coercive. This discussion will center on legitimate power as a form of power frequently exerted within formal organizations. This type of power is traditionally assumed and generally accepted from the leadership of white men in dominant culture organizations (Gostnell, 1996). According to French and Raven, legitimate power is contingent upon the willingness of subordinates to accept the authority of the power holder.

Legitimate power is derived from an individual's position with the organizational structure (French & Raven, 1959). This position of power extends beyond a leader's capacity to hire, fire, or promote. It encompasses stakeholders and all relationships inside and outside of the organization. By an individual's mere position or status within the organization, stakeholders and other interested parties generally accept a leader's status within the organizational hierarchy. In an organizational context, subordinates are expected to accept the legitimate power of a leader based on the leader's position within the structure of the organization. The leader has the legitimate right to expect that subordinates will comply with his or her exercise of authority. Non-compliance to a leader's legitimate power based on perceptions of the leader's self identity (race, gender, and/or class), may be problematic to objectives and outcomes of the leadership task. Accepting (rejecting) AAW's legitimate power may be a function of interpersonal similarities (or differences) that provide a basis for subordinates' perceptions of leader-follower fit.

*Theory signifying the relationship between leader and follower.* Leadership assumes the existence of a relationship between leader and followers (Northouse, 2004). An example is Graen's (1976) LMX theory, which is based on a reciprocal relationship between leaders and subordinates. According to Graen (1976), trust building is an important step in the process of establishing a successful leader-member relationship. Successfully negotiating this process often depends on similarities between the leader and member. While the implications may be that subordinates are the most likely affected by unsuccessful relationship building based on differences, the same might be said of leaders who do not fit the leadership norm. In light of this, it may be problematic for AAW leaders in predominantly white organizations to develop a leader-member relationship with (white) subordinates that have had few dealings with blacks on a professional level. Because people prefer to interact with others like themselves, they are less likely to have meaningful interactions with those different from themselves (Ohlott, Chrobot-Mason, & Dalton, 2004).

In LMX, a pattern of ongoing social exchange is established between the leader and member. The initial reaction to a minority leader tends to involve a period of scrutiny where (white) subordinates assess a leader-follower fit (Waters, 1992). Perceptions based on the other's race and/or gender as well as other differences is critical to the development of this process. Therefore, negotiating a leader-member relationship between a leader of a different race, gender, and social class may be more difficult to establish and maintain.

*Other related theories of power.* Consideration might be given to other theories that relate to power and relationships between leader and followers. For example, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension theory contains a relational concept termed power-distance. Power distance being the degree of difference one feels between their level in the organization and their superior's level in the organization; or how one views another as having power greater than themselves. Hofstede's (1980) framework suggests that we do not easily separate the interactions that take place in organizations and workplaces from what is happening in society. Similarly, Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation holds a power-related concept. According to the theory of motivation, the leader is responsible for motivating and empowering employees to reach their full potential.



However, if the leader is from a marginalized group (e.g. AAW) the leader might encounter resistance to the exercise of leadership, thereby creating an unfavorable relationship for motivation to be an expected outcome. Likewise, an upward relationship may exist whereby if the leader is from a marginalized group (e.g. AAW), race, gender, and/or social class may produce an unfavorable relationship for empowerment to be an expected outcome.

### *Judging the Soundness of Theory*

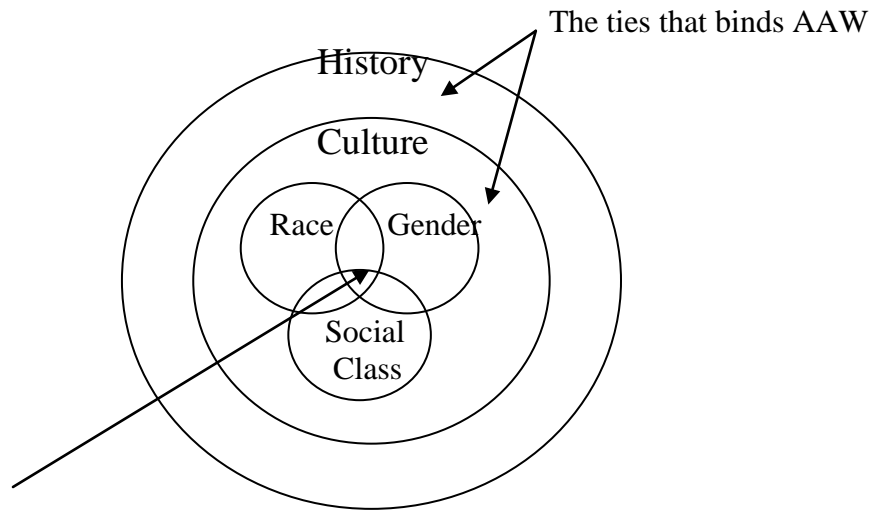
Patterson (1983) advanced the following criteria for judging good theory: importance, preciseness and clarity, parsimony and simplicity, comprehensiveness, operationality, empirical validity or verification, fruitfulness, and practicality. According to Lincoln and Lynham (2006) elements for judging theory are generally represented from an empirical-analytical perspective and are not representative of applied fields. For this reason, these scholars offer the following criteria for judging theory from an interpretive perspective: compellingness (creates a response), saturation (explanations have reached a point of exhaustion), prompt to action (drives the next steps), and fittingness (suitable to the context).

Brookfield (1992) proposed three categories of criteria for analyzing the central proposition of formal theory: epistemological, communicative, and critically analytic. Epistemological criteria refer to the discreteness (not susceptible to explanation by other theories); empirical grounding (extent to which grounded in observation or experience); researchability (can be validated by those other than the original theorist); and comprehensiveness (extent to which all aspects of the phenomenon are considered) of the theory. Communicative criteria (clarity, tone, connectedness, and prescriptive policing) are ways that theories are clearly understood by those for whom they are intended. Critically analytic criteria refer to the ways that theories are subjected to “constant critical analysis by its own proponents” (p. 87). Another consideration is the transportability of theory (Y. S. Lincoln & S. A. Lynham, personal communication, October 31, 2007). This concept is based upon the ability of a theory to not simply hold true, but to explain a phenomenon across multiple contexts and be relevant to multiple groups and stakeholders. According to Brookfield (1992) theory building should consider gender, social class, ethnicity, and age. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the ways that theory changes over time in response to the emergent nature of research and the changing dynamics in society.

### *Leadership Perspectives of AAW Emerging from Historical and Cultural Foundations*

The landscape of an African American woman’s life is shaped and designed by history and culture; opening new arenas for growth and opportunity while erecting barriers to socially constructed forces of oppression (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Although the biases of the broader society may restrict, delay, or minimize AAW’s leadership in predominantly white organizations, to resist these biases, AAW have gained support from historical and cultural foundations (Gostnell, 1996). Figure 1 represents the historical and cultural aspects which may shape AAW’s identity within the larger society and thus her identity as a leader in predominantly white organizations (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Allen, 1995). The inner circles represent oppressive,

socially constructed forces that challenge AAW leaders. History and culture are external forces that AAW draw support upon from internal forces that oppress.



AAW experience race,  
gender, and social class  
oppression  
simultaneously

Figure 1. External forces that bind, internal forces that oppress

Considering how history and culture has shaped an AAW life is useful for understanding the leadership experiences of this group. Therefore, to be inclusive of AAW, the examination of leadership requires a socio-cultural lens as well as an organizational one.



*Historical and Cultural Foundations of AAW Leaders*

A sense of community emerges from the historical and cultural aspects of an AAW's life. The circumstances emerging from a legacy of struggle experienced by the African American community in general created a form of resistance to which AAW responded by organizing efforts to survive. The oppression of AAW emerging from this legacy of struggle (Allen, 1996; Robnett, 1996) has centered around five themes: survival, resistance, social activism, community uplift, and transformation (Parker, 2005). Based on this insight, it might be beneficial to consider AAW as leaders from a historical perspective. As Dilthey (1976) points out, a historical perspective is necessary to discover the interrelatedness of the part to the whole. From a holistic perspective, historical foundation adds richness to the overall human experience of AAW.

AAW's involvement in the community speaks to social activism and social change (Rogers, 2005; Delany & Rogers, 2004). Involvement in the church and community has been found to be influential sources that have nurtured, shaped, and empowered AAW (Meux, 2002). This foundation has supported a cultural and social epistemology based on the determination for liberation and social change. Furthermore, family, church, and community are sources AAW draw upon to overcome and transcend racism and other barriers to their professional lives (Island, 2006). Therefore, it is useful to recognize AAW's leadership as a product of group survival and community uplift.

*Perspectives of African American Women in Educational Leadership*

Educational leadership is a resourceful area to study the experiences of AAW leaders and the interactive effects of race, gender, and social class. As the number of AAW principals, superintendents and other administrative positions increases in predominantly white schools, AAW are confronted by the power play of multiple stakeholder groups (community, parents, faculty, and students) that are unaccustomed and resistant to the changing face of school leadership. Compounding the experiences of AAW educational leaders is feeling compelled to work harder than their white counterparts in order to prove self-worth and maintain high standards for their schools (Bloom and Erlandson, 2003).

In academia, racism and sexism have been referred to as the double blind syndrome, subjecting AAW to an invisible and hidden form of marginalization (Stanley, 2006). AAW faculty report that students demonstrate greater tendencies to challenge or question their authority as opposed to white faculty and in some instances ignore or fail to acknowledge their educational status altogether (Stanley, Porter, & Ouellett, 2003). In addition, AAW report lack of recognition for their research, questioning of credentials, being excluded from information, and perceiving an atmosphere of being unwelcome--particularly among white male faculty. Consequently, leadership theory that helps explain racism and sexism in the experiences of AAW in these types of circumstances is necessary.

Because AAW are uniquely positioned within an interlocking system of race, gender, and social class, the experiences of this group cannot be understood by studying the experiences of women faculty in general or, for that matter, by studying the experiences of AA male faculty in

academia (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002). Race-based, gender-based, and institutional-based issues create the lens through which AAW in academia process the actions and culture of their institutions (Grimes, 2003). To survive this culture, AAW often seek community with others that similarly situated. Drawing from a shared, collective culture of power with others that are similarly situated can be used to empower and possibly counter the effects of power used to dominate and control (Hebert, 1996).

### *Perspectives of AAW in Organizational Leadership*

Similar to experiences of AAW leaders in educational leadership, AAW leaders in organizational leadership positions regularly confront discrimination and bias in exercising their leadership authority (Parker, 2005). Organizational leadership refers to the practice of leadership within a context where individuals are held to norms, values, and beliefs of the organization's culture (Parker, 2001). An organization's culture is justified through norms and values, and perceived through underlying assumptions of people within the organization (Schein, 1992). One underlying assumption of members within an organization is that leaders look, act, and think in ways that reflect the culture of the organization (Parker, 2001). However, this expectation may be in conflict with the stereotypical assumptions about AAW when "white, middle-class cultural values and beliefs are the norm to which organizational members are expected to adapt" (p. 45). While white men dominate the organizational culture in U. S. organizations, this group has been slow to acknowledge the possibility that racist and sexist structures are intentionally maintained for the purpose of power and privilege (Ross-Gordon & Brooks, 2004).

Although the double-edged sword of race and gender cuts deeply, AAW in middle and upper management report "racism rather than sexism, as the greater barrier to opportunity in dominant culture organizations" (Parker and Ogilvie, 1996, p. 197). Because these acts of bias are often subtle and overt, encounters can be a source of confusion and frustration. The resulting issue then is how AAW negotiate the process of leadership within a predominantly white organization's culture--by adapting to the norm or by offering new meanings and greater options for leading based on the multiple perspectives they bring to the leadership experience.

Consistent with reports from AAW in educational leadership, AAW leaders in organizational settings report disempowering encounters where their authority is constantly questioned or scrutinized, where lack of access to social networks limits access to information, or situations in which they must undergo a trial period of having their qualifications validated before being accepted in their roles (Byrd, 2008; Stokes, 1996). The most salient and challenging of these encounters and situations are perceived as being associated with race and gender.

In Western culture, the notion of leadership has been traditionally fixed on images of middle class white men, and more recently white women, as the leader. The image of AAW in positions of power and authority distorts this fixed image (Parker, 2005). As a result, the dominant perception of who is best fit to lead tends to grant power and privilege to certain groups (white men), while restricting others (AAW). The dominant perspective that frames our understanding of the power and authority of a leader in organizations is competitive and distant, a perspective

generally associated with the leadership of white men (Parker, 2005). However this perspective is inconsistent with AAW's tendency to use a more interactive and collaborative process of leadership, emphasizing empowerment through community building.

*Returning to the Case of Dorothy*

In organizations and workplaces, leaders are perceived as having a position of power and authority to fulfill their roles. However, minority leaders in U. S. organizations frequently encounter opposition to their leadership authority reflected in (white) subordinates' initial perceptions and reluctance to accept a minority's capacity as leader (Waters, 1992). These perceptions may have an adverse effect on leadership effectiveness, as minority leaders are painfully aware of the differential treatment to which they are subjected. Consequently one's perception of the leader's power is significant to the establishment of the leader's authority.

In the opening story, Dorothy experienced disempowering encounters that challenged her leadership. Disempowerment occurs in the form of challenging authority, resisting, resenting, undermining, or even ignoring an AAW's position of power and influence within the organization. In today's organizations, encounters with discriminatory acts are more subtle and overt in nature (Deitch et al, 2003). Moreover, the experiences of groups such as AAW, who have struggled against societal barriers constructed by race, gender, and social class are less understood by individuals who have experienced privilege and power in their lives. Therefore marginalized experiences are often dismissed as being unimportant, insignificant, or over-exaggerated.

Complicating Dorothy's experience was her outsider-within position (Collins, 1998). The essence of this experience is that the individual is the only person of color in a setting. Whites are often insensitive to the feeling of being alienated, unaccepted undervalued, and alone. In Dorothy's situation her outsider-within position placed her on the margins and outside the social network system. In organizations, a social network system creates social stratification that is usually positioned across racial lines. Dorothy's outsider-within status and lack of access to the social network system in her organization also placed restriction on her power and influence. At the same time Dorothy's marginalized status empowered her subordinate, a white woman, who had direct access and participation in the social network system.

Because perceptions are often derived from personal biases, the manner in which a leader's authority is perceived will vary from organization to organization and from one context to another. For example, white men who have traditionally been the accepted leaders may not easily accept an AAW's position of power and influence. White women may resist the leadership of AAW because, historically speaking, AAW have been held to sub-status or sub-class positions in relation to white women, which may be difficult to dispel in a leader-follower relationship. For that matter, African American men may feel threatened by AAW's rise to positions of leadership. Furthermore, AAW within the same organization may not necessarily bond to

another AAW's leadership. However in the latter two, race does not necessarily restrict the followers' perceptions of the leader in the same manner as the first two relationships.

Traditional leadership theories such as French and Raven's (1959) legitimate power theory and Graen's (1976) leader-member relationship emerged during eras when the typical image of who leads in organizations was developed with the image of white men at the helm. As such these theories fixed the notion of leadership as race neutral (Parker, 2005). Race neutral refers to the failure to recognize that organizations are not neutral settings where all leaders are the same and are subjected to the same type of historical and cultural experience. Historically, society has a fixed image of AAW as being subservient and holding positions of servitude. As such, the acceptance of AAW as leaders may be distorted by this socially constructed image. As a result, when AAW enter organizations as managers and leaders, they are often challenged to deconstruct the stereotypical image and re-define themselves within a socially fixed image of who leads an organization--white men, and more recently white women (Parker, 2005).

The face of leadership in organizations is changing and although the numbers are still small, AAW are now holding executive positions in major, predominantly white organizations in the U. S. (Catalyst, 2004). The absence of socio-cultural theories that explain and more importantly, expose the existence of race, gender, and social class on the everyday realities and experiences of AAW serves to minimize the existence of AAW as leaders (Gostnell, 1996). Furthermore, without persistent inquiry of a problem, developing applicable theory will remain lacking (Lynham, 2002).

#### *Socio-Cultural Theory--An Alternative*

Socio-cultural refers to theoretical perspectives that consider race, gender, and social class in analyzing power dynamics within bureaucratic and other systems where power can be used to oppress (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Traditional theories of leadership are based on an idealized notion of white middle class men as leaders, which sends the message of who is best suited to lead (Parker, 2005). In order to understand the organizational context as well as the sociological aspect of AAW's leadership in predominantly white organizations, socio-cultural theoretical frameworks are needed to bridge this understanding. According to Bloom and Erlandson (2003), a useful framework for studying the complexities surrounding the experiences of AAW leaders in predominantly white organizations is Critical Race Theory (CRT).

#### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1993; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) evolved during the 1960s, a period of social unrest in the United States (Crenshaw, 2002). CRT is a socio-cultural theory rooted in legal scholarship and based on the notion of the social construction and reality of race. This theory expands Critical Legal Studies in critiquing social power and illegitimate social hierarchy. As a theoretical framework, CRT can be used to uncover the inequities existing in organizations and promoting social change within organizational contexts.

CRT speaks from a critical raced-gendered epistemology that allows researchers to embrace the use of counter stories, narratives, and autobiographies to unveil the unique experiences of AAW and other women of color (Bernal, 2002). Storytelling challenges dominant ideologies and creates new and culturally relevant ways to view and re-interpret traditional ways of knowing. For instance, in the opening story, Dorothy described encounters emerging from issues of race, gender, and social class in her leadership experiences. Encountering issues that are oppressive in relation to one's social location is consistent with how CRT gives centrality to racism and other forms of intersectionality. "Race-gendered epistemologies emerge from ways of knowing that are in direct contrast with the dominant Eurocentric epistemology partially as a result of histories that are based on the intersection of racism, sexism, classism and other forms of subordination" (Bernal, 2002, p. 110).

According to Taylor (2004), CRT posits, "issues of race, class, and gender are inextricably bound by economic, social, and political hegemonic power structures" (p. 35). CRT provides a means for people of color to communicate experiences and realities through narratives and storytelling and consequently, critically examine racial issues within the context of the workplace. Stories like Dorothy's exemplify how storytelling can be used to give voice to marginalized people in the workplace.

Using CRT places AAW's encounters with race, gender, and social class at the center of analysis and represents a shift from traditional leadership perspectives that have focused on "race-neutral, dichotomized notions of masculine and feminine leadership" (Parker, 2005, p. xii). CRT uses counter stories based on real, lived experiences that challenge the discourse and beliefs of dominant viewpoints. Moreover, CRT renders visible and deconstructs attitudes and structural barriers that pervade the workplace (Bernier & Rocco, 2003). In addition, CRT recognizes the societal struggles that AAW bring to predominantly white organizations when they enter to lead. Power, white privilege, racial and sexual oppression can be disempowering to AAW's leadership (Bernier & Rocco, 2003). CRT can be used as a paradigm to deconstruct the perceptions, assumptions, and biases that support the unequal use of power in organizations.

### *Recommendations and Conclusion*

In this discussion, an argument was made for theories to explain the challenges AAW leaders experience in predominantly white organizations--specifically, the challenges that the interactive effects of power and influence with race, gender, and social class. French and Raven's (1959) bases of power, and Graen's (1976) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory were used in this discussion as examples of traditional theories of power and influence. However these theories do not address dynamics that emerge from encounters with the race, gender, and social class of the leader. Furthermore, these theories do not satisfy the criteria for judging the effectiveness of theory.

First, these theories do not offer a response (Lincoln & Lynham, 2006) to the dilemmas created by the race, gender, and/or social class. Second, the theories are not comprehensive (Patterson, 1983) in that they do not consider all aspects and actors involved in the phenomenon of leadership. Finally they are not reflective of contemporary society and do not consider dynamics such as gender, social class, and ethnicity (Brookfield, 1992).

Traditional theories of leadership, such as French and Raven's (1959) power and influence and Graen's (1976) LMX theories, are race neutral and are based on the experiences of white men and white women. Therefore, these theories are inadequate for explaining leadership in respect to power and influence with an interlocking system of race, gender, and social class. Bringing this interlocking system to the discourse on leadership adds a new perspective to the phenomenon that is not addressed in traditional discourse. Furthermore, theory-building research that explains the challenges AAW leaders in predominantly white organizations face in respect to the combined effects of race, gender, and social class is severely lacking.

The significance of theories for explaining and thereby understanding the leadership experiences of AAW is necessary for providing and improving leadership development opportunities for AAW as emerging leaders in organizations. Socio-cultural theories such as CRT, that are nontraditional to the research of leadership in organizations, provides a framework to broaden the traditional theories and inform our understanding of AAW's leadership in predominantly white organizations. In addition, CRT offers insight on how the intersection of race, gender, and social class limit and restrict the power and influence of AAW leaders in these organizational contexts. Therefore, CRT provides a framework for bringing social issues into discourse, thus countering the traditionally held theories of leadership.

Research on the impact of race, gender, and social class on AAW's leadership in predominantly white organizations may be understudied because the study itself is interdisciplinary and requires insight from a number of perspectives. In addition, organizational researchers are likely to study a phenomenon through a different lens from sociological and cultural studies researchers, although the study of AAWs' leadership in predominantly white organizations calls for a blend of the two perspectives.

### *Recommendations*

Theory-building research in the area of leadership in organizations needs more qualitative studies that capture the essence of people's experiences. Through qualitative studies researchers can begin to collect rich and descriptive data of lived experiences in the workplace that will lend to greater theory building opportunities. Parker and Oglivie (1996) recommended research that illuminates how AAW leaders encounter racism and sexism and the ways these interactive effects are perceived by subordinates, peers, and superiors. This might be addressed through leadership models that will support a more inclusive perspective of leadership, thereby informing the experiences of a larger audience of leaders (Parker, 2005).

Lynham (2000) suggested a general theory of leadership is needed because the traditional theories do not adequately address the challenges of modern day leaders. Towards this end, Lynham developed a Theory of Responsible Leadership for Performance (RLP) to help integrate and demystify the leadership body of knowledge. The RLP proposes, "leadership is a purposeful, focused system not an individual or a process managed by an individual" (p. 179). By reframing the purpose which leadership has to fulfill, the RLP could be used to bridge the gap between existing, traditional perspectives of leadership and the growing need for more socio-cultural perspectives of leadership.



*Conclusion*

The study of AAW and leadership is an investigation of a phenomenon (leadership) from the perspective of a group that has been subjected to socially constructed phenomena (race, gender, and social class). Therefore, the intersection of race, gender, and social class on the professional lives of AAW should be included in explaining the leadership experiences of this marginalized group. However, intersectionality is an aspect of AAW lives' that has primarily been the focus of scholars from sociology and and/or women's studies. One explanation for this may be attributed to the larger numbers of African American scholars affiliated with these fields.

The growing number of AAW in positions of leadership in predominantly white organizations increases the need for explaining the challenges that the combined effects of race, gender, and social class with power and influence places on the leadership experience--challenges which are not experienced by white men or white women in these positions. Therefore either theory-building research is needed in this area or alternative theoretical paradigms should be considered for a more inclusive theoretical perspective of leadership. Although researchers have studied leadership of a diverse workforce (Waters, 1992), research of marginalized leaders who may be challenged in their exercise of leadership in predominantly white organizations is lacking. In addition, scholars from fields such as management and organizational studies generally study leadership as a universal phenomenon; although this generalized approach excludes socio-cultural realities that may be associated with the process of leading. This is problematic for AAW leaders, because the socio-cultural realities exist regardless of the context. The social realities that exist for an AAW in society will also exist and restrict her role as a leader.

To ensure that the leadership theories we draw upon are adequate and inclusive of all those in positions of leadership, the interactive effects of power and influence with race, gender, and social class should be brought into the conversation. Embracing the race, gender, and social class of the leader brings AAW from the margins to the center of analysis, thus adding a new dimension to the concept of leadership and taking the analysis of leadership and construction of leadership theory to new arenas (Parker, 2005; Allen, 1995).



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