

Where are the African American Women Leaders? A Call for More Nuanced Research in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this article, the author interrogates the scholarship that emphasizes gender and racial inequities in academic senior-level leadership in the context of underrepresented groups, particularly that of women of color. The discussion begins by examining and explaining critical theories and frameworks addressing the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education high-ranking leadership positions. The author explores the nuances of leadership styles as a possible explanation for the paucity of women of color female leaders. Research on women's leadership in the academy indicates that race is obscured due to the lack of data. The author, therefore, concludes with a call for more nuanced research.

Faculty of color, including African American women, continue to be significantly underrepresented in top-level leadership roles in higher education in the United States (US) per National Center for Educational Statistics (2016). Although racial and ethnic diversity in the US higher education system presents a broad general demographic shift, administrators at predominantly White institutions have been ineffective in diversifying their own senior-level systems of governance to reflect the changing face of the US. Since desegregation and the civil rights and women's rights movements, Black women have made significantly less gains in higher education positions of leadership and administrative authority in comparison to Black males, White females, and White males (NCES, 2016).

Gains in senior-level leadership roles in higher education have been sluggish and, in some instances, have declined for women of color (Kim & Cook, 2013). However, African American women have been appointed to upper-level leadership posts for decades in historically Black colleges and universities. They have held positions of leadership as founders, presidents, deans, and department chairpersons (Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Mosley, 1980). Nevertheless, apart from specific types of institutions, such as two-year colleges and lower-tier four-year institutions (Grant, 2016; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011), the number of women of color in senior-level roles in higher education remains scant (Oguntoyinbo, 2014; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). At the highest levels of higher education administration, the percentage of chief academic officers (CAOs) who are women rose from 40% to 43% from 2008 to 2013. However, the number of African American CAOs declined from 3.7% to 2.3%, Asian American CAOs declined from 3.7% to 2.4%, and Hispanic CAOs declined from 1.5% to 0.8% during the same timeframe (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). These data indicate that not only are women of color underrepresented in top-level leadership positions in academe, their roles at this high level are diminishing. Furthermore, only 23% of college and university president posts in the U.S. are held by women even though they are more likely than their male counterparts to have earned a doctorate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The overwhelming majority of these women presidents govern two-year institutions and liberal arts and women's colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Nationally, men out-number women in upper-level administrative positions throughout higher education (i.e., presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans) and particularly at four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

The current discourse on ethnic and racial diversity in the context of higher education is particularly relevant, in part, because the student population of universities and colleges in the US are becoming increasingly diverse (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; 2011). Specifically, the percentage of American college and university students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing. During the period from 1976 to 2014, the percentage of White students decreased from 84% to 58%, while Blacks increased from 10% to 14%; Hispanics increased from 4% to 17%; and Asian/Pacific Islanders increased from 2% to 7%; American Indian/Alaska Natives increased from 0.7% to 0.8% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). The absence or presence of racially and ethnically diverse leadership can influence the sense of welcome and belonging to students and other administrators (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; 2011). Additionally, research indicates that staff, faculty, and leaders of color act to reduce isolation of students of color, serve as positive role models to students of all backgrounds, and provide distinct viewpoints with respect to the institutional core values, policies, and practices (Antonio, 2003). Academic and administrative leaders of color contribute to the educational acclimation and achievement of students of color (Turner, 2002), the retention and satisfaction of faculty of color, and to institutional effectiveness (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Mena, 2016).

In this article, the author interrogates the scholarship that emphasizes gender and racial inequities in academic senior-level leadership in the context of underrepresented groups, particularly that of women of color. The discussion begins by examining and explaining critical theories and frameworks addressing the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education high-ranking leadership positions. Leadership styles may well be a factor in this underrepresentation of AAW in high-ranking positions; thus, the author explores the nuances of leadership styles. Consideration is given to whether other generally unacknowledged factors shape African American women's leadership development and if that has bearing on the problematic paucity of African American female leaders. A burgeoning body of literature exists on the leadership styles of women in general (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014). Relatively little scholarship explores the leadership styles of women of color in higher education (Jean-Marie, Williams & Sherman, 2006); hence, race is obscured due to the lack of data. The author, therefore, concludes with a call for more nuanced research. The significance of this article lies in the recognition of the extant literature's limitation to capture the cultural aspects of leadership among women of color. The collection of such data may both shed more light on this problem and also point to better ways to address it.

Explanations for Underrepresentation of African American Women in Academe

Explanations for the underrepresentation of African American Women in the academy are many and include barriers and challenges such as sexism and racism, stereotypes, and isolation. The literature also offers several theories that take these aspects of experience into account in terms of institutional advancement, such as the glass ceiling theory, concrete ceiling theory, and pipeline theory.

Sexism and Racism

The historical experiences of African American women emanate from discrimination and exclusion and are located at the intersection of race and gender, examined through an intersectional prism (Collins, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991). Overcoming sexism and racism creates a dichotomy that African American women must address on a daily basis (Collins, 2014; McCray, 2011). Terms such as "multiple jeopardy" (Benjamin, 1997; Chliwniak, 1997), "double Jeopardy" (Wilson 1989); "triple jeopardy" (King, 1988; Lindsay, 1999), "double bind" (Lindsay, 1999), "double burden" (Singh, Robinson, & Williams-Green, 1995), "interactive discrimination" (Wilson, 1989), "racialized sexism" (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) and "double solo" (Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993; Kanter, 1977) appear often in the literature on women of color in higher education administration. These terms all describe the collective, lived experience of traversing the conflicting expectations that surface when an individual is considered to have membership in two marginalized categories or groups (Crenshaw, 1991) suffering the dual effects of racism and sexism (Collins, 2014). Stereotypes involving race and gender also emerge as a distinct issue in the literature (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008).

Stereotypes

According to an American Association of University Women (AAUW) study (2016) gender and racial stereotypes overlap to create unique—and uniquely powerful—stereotypes. Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) contended that "One major factor that affects positionality, particularly for women of color, is our society's assigning problematic stereotypes to women of color" (p. 59).

Furthermore, Madden (2005) found that the intersection of race, gender, and leadership often lead to racial and sexual stereotyping, unfair assessment of work performance, token status, and unrealistic expectations that diminished the opportunity for career advancement. Analyzing the effects of false characterizations or biased perceptions of African American women in leadership, Perry and Gundersen (2011) argued that women's success is based on how they balance the oppression between racial prejudice and gender inequality rather than the dynamic of the leadership position itself. Crites (2015), in a recent study found that people retain their stereotypical views, even when their personal experience presents evidence contradicting a stereotype. Some top-level women leaders argue that the issue is not to identify the stereotypes and learn to outsmart them, but rather to demand that society no longer recognize them (Perry & Gundersen, 2011).

Isolation

Many black women's experiences in higher education administration have left them feeling invisible, marginalized, and disempowered and these factors have inextricably led to their underrepresentation in the academy. (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Kersh, Renique, 2012). Oftentimes the only one of their racial group, African American women faculty tend to work in isolation at predominantly White institutions of higher learning and this leads to a growing sense of isolation and dissatisfaction about the workplace. (Lloyd-Jones, 2014; Wallace, Moore, Wilson & Hart, 2012). In a national study of campus climate, retention, and satisfaction, Jayakumar et al. (2009) found that 75 percent of faculty of underrepresented backgrounds described their campus climates as moderate to highly negative, and reported low job satisfaction, and an increased desire to leave the academy. Subsequently, their descriptions of the campus were associated with perceptions of high racial hostility on campus. Interestingly, these authors also noted that institutions where these faculty members perceived hostility was highest also had the largest retention rates for White/Caucasian faculty (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen & Han, 2009). In brief, White academics tended to find the campus satisfactory unlike much of the faculty of color. While racism/sexisim, stereotypes, and isolation are all aspects of lived experience, they figure into more structural ways of conceiving the challenges and barriers African American women face in academia (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Glass ceiling, concrete ceiling, and pipeline theories all frame these issues in terms of barriers to advancement in the academy.

Glass Ceiling Theory

The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) defined glass ceiling theory as "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into senior-level positions" (p. 34). Danziger and Eden (2007) argued "the glass-ceiling barrier sustains and reproduces occupational inequality between the sexes, even when individuals possess similar education, skills, and competence levels" (p. 130). Further, Jackson and O'Callaghan (2009) theorized that an inimitable intersection between gender and race exists with respect to glass-ceiling effects. In support of this intersecting relationship, Grant (2016) contended African American academics may face barriers not only as women but also as members of a racial group that is underrepresented in academia. Similarly, a National Center for Education Statistics report (2016) about African Americans in corporate America, emphasized the endurance of the glass ceiling and concluded that women of color experience greater underrepresentation than do majority-group women.

Concrete Ceiling Theory

The endurance of the glass ceiling described above evolves into what researchers refer to as the concrete ceiling. The concrete ceiling is described as an additional rung in the ladder representing the specific challenges of African American women in the workplace. Explained as more difficult to pass through than the glass ceiling, the ceiling composed of concrete is depicted as virtually impossible for women to see past the obstacles to glimpse a view of the hypothetical corner office (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). Further, the opaque barrier is representative of the historical struggles and impositions that block African American women from obtaining their goals in the workplace (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). These are just some of the reasons why Rankin (1998) stated that the history of African American women in higher education is a lesson in courage, persistence, and rising above adversity. More recently, Gangone (2013) reported that "academe is a system that is unwelcoming to women and people of color" (p. 4). Moreover, research evidence indicated that the lack of upward trajectories of women of color as senior administrators in academe "stems not from a lack of preparation or the requisite knowledge and skills but rather the resistant and persistent presence of discriminatory practices and the biases that sustain them" (Welch, 2011, p. 3).

Pipeline Theory

The pipeline theory (White, 2005) has also been advanced as contributing to the underrepresentation of women of color in top-level leadership roles in academia. Conceptualized as a ‘leaky pipe,’ this theory posits that women, including women of color are not completing graduate and doctoral programs at the increased rate in which they are earning undergraduate degrees, hence there are too few women qualified for leadership positions. However, recent research findings in the ACE 2017 Report identified the leaky pipe theory as a “pipeline myth.” The data indicate women are moving through the pipeline and being prepared for leadership positions at a greater rate than men, with female students having earned half or more of all baccalaureate degrees for the past three decades and half of all doctoral degrees for almost a decade. Despite the number of female graduates available for leadership positions, women do not hold associate professor or full professor positions at the same rate as their male peers (ACE, 2017). Although women in all racial and ethnic groups are attending college at higher rates than their male counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), in the national landscape of colleges and universities, men clearly continue to dominate senior-level roles. In sum, empirical data indicate that women of color, including African American women, are underrepresented in upper-level leadership posts in academia, and, as noted earlier, scholars proffer several explanations for this system of gender and racial inequality (Beckwith, Carter & Peters, 2016; Grant, 2012; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003; Tillman, 2011).

One might think the legal system has addressed the issue of underrepresented leaders, particularly African American women academic in leadership. But a brief review of such legal reforms shows they have only had minimal effect. To advance equality for women and people of color and eradicate gender and race discrimination across fields of employment, congress enacted three laws in the 1960s and 1970s.

Laws to Eradicate Gender and Race Discrimination

The Equal Pay Act was the first law enacted, and it prohibited sex discrimination in employment (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the second law passed, which prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, and national origin (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Title IX of the Education Amendment was the third law enacted, and it prohibited sex discrimination in institutions that received federal grants, loans or contracts (Rai & Crizer, 2000). The data on women of color in general and particularly African American women in academic leadership are striking and somewhat discouraging because, despite these national legislative efforts, according to Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016), they are scarce in the academy. Leadership styles may well play a role here as part of an explanation of why legislative efforts have not been successful. Northouse (2015) defines leadership style as a leader’s way of providing direction, implement plans, and motivating workers, which often plays a factor in promotion to leadership positions. Additionally, leadership style emphasizes the idea that different situations require different kinds of leadership, which often plays a factor in promotion to leadership positions. One factor in understanding the scarcity of representation in leadership positions among African American women and possible remedies could be in developing knowledge of their leadership styles.

African American Women and Leadership Styles

Paucity of Scholarship

Stogdill (1974) argued that “there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 7). The common thread, though, in most leadership definitions is influence. Pierce and Newstrom (2008) advance a broad definition of leadership and define it as a “sociological phenomenon involving the intentional exercise of influence to guide others toward some mutual attainment of goals” (p. 10). Although the US is more diverse than it has ever been, only a small number of studies of leadership have included women and an even smaller number of women of color. Unfortunately, scholarly research that describes African American women’s professional leadership style is scant (Chun & Evans, 2012), and only a few studies have explored the intersection of race and leadership (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). Parker (2004) contended that leadership literature is “presented as race neutral and assumed generalized to all people” (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996) and “grounded within perspectives that assume racial neutrality, while privileging White middle-class cultural norms and values reinforced through gender symbolism that operates as the universal depiction of men and women across cultural and class boundaries” (p. xi).

In support of a more inclusive leadership literature, particularly in the context of academia, Eagly and Chin (2010) asserted:

Scholars of leadership have infrequently addressed the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture, gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This omission has weakened the ability of research and theory to address some of the most provocative aspects of contemporary leadership, including (a) the limited access of individuals from diverse identity groups to leadership roles; (b) the shaping of leaders' behaviors by their dual identities; and (c) the potential of individuals from groups formerly excluded from leadership roles to provide excellent leadership because of their differences from traditional leaders (p. 216).

For Black women, Parker (2005) described their leadership style as transformational—that is focused on social change and liberation (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Parker, 2005). According to Carli & Eagly (2007) women integrate a combination of transformational and transactional leadership and tend to demonstrate communal qualities more than agentic qualities, which men typically exhibit. Communal qualities demonstrate compassion, empathy, and kindness. Agentic qualities demonstrate assertiveness, ambition, dominance, and self-confidence. Although women and men may demonstrate both sets of qualities, each gender tends to gravitate towards one or the other. Women, however, who demonstrate agentic characteristics, are often thought of as pushy or aggressive. Males exhibiting the same traits are often considered productive and likeable. Both examples underscore the persistence of stereotypes. The possibility that men and women may present different leadership styles supports the concept that leaders' behavior is a major predictor of their effectiveness and chance for advancement (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). However, it is key to note that this research includes all women, irrespective of race or ethnicity.

To address the gender leadership divide, studies tend to support the idea that transformational leadership is a feminine style. Although transformational leadership is an effective style for men as well, it may be more imperative that women demonstrate these skills to offset the societal responses regarding assertive female leaders (Eagly et al., 2003). Carli and Eagly (2007) supported the idea that women are often disliked and considered untrustworthy when filling leadership roles that exert authority over males. It is apparent that the qualities required to succeed as a woman in leadership are a complex combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics (Johnson, 2015). However, once again, it is key to note that this research includes all women, irrespective of race or ethnicity. Thus, it obscures African American women's experience and that of women of other ethnicities. Applied critical leadership, which is discussed in the next section, is an approach that sheds light on what is considered obscure currently.

Applied Critical Leadership: Lived Experiences as Influence on Leadership Style

Applied critical leadership is a strengths-based model of leadership practice (i.e., style) where educational leaders consider how specific attributes of their identities, life experiences, practices or styles can support them in their role as leader (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). Valverde (2011) offered a recommendation that echoes this model, arguing that to shape their future, women of color consider augmenting their critical role of change agent with new leadership styles. Transformational and participatory leadership styles are two approaches he advocates. By combining the transformational and participatory leadership styles with the behavior of change advocates, women of color will accomplish two major goals: eliminate societal negative forces and advance the academy (Valverde, 2011). Ironically, the experience of social isolation and scholarly marginalization at predominantly White institutions of higher education has the potential to improve the academic climate and situation for women of color in leadership roles (Mena, 2016). Valverde's (2011) conceptions include the following: Women of color will be

- smarter because they will learn to outthink or rethink how to overcome man-made (traditional?) barriers placed in their path;
- more experienced due to the longer time in the apprentice mode;
- be stronger because of the necessity to be resilient and endure hardships and disappointments; and refashion their organizations to accommodate a diverse student body; they will be part of the change fabric. (p. 72)

Although conceptual in nature, Valverde's theory points to the potential of what could perhaps be discovered through deeper inquiry into specific leadership styles of African American women. His postulations about the possibility of transformation are worth considering. The standpoints of both applied critical leadership theory and Valverde's notion of leadership, centers on the premise that women of color, especially African American women, can use adverse experiences as a foundation of strength to develop and practice leadership in academe. That is, while working on the margins in their professional careers, women of color and other historically underrepresented groups have acquired relevant cognitive, social, and leadership competencies (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016).

Conclusion

African American women, are significantly underrepresented in senior-level leadership positions in higher education in the US. However, the percentage of American college and university students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing. Jackson and O'Callaghan (2009; 2011) argue that leadership that reflects the demographic of the university student body communicates a favorable message to students with respect to diversity and inclusion efforts. Accounts for the underrepresentation of African American women leaders in the academy are several, including social constructs such as sexism, racism, and stereotypes. Theories used to explain the lack of women of color in academic leadership include glass ceiling theory, concrete ceiling theory, and pipeline theory. Leadership style tends not to be considered as a factor in understanding the scarcity of representation in leadership positions among African American women. Possible remedies for their absence could be in developing knowledge of African American women's leadership styles. However, much of the research on women's leadership style combines all women without taking into account race and ethnicity.

Moreover, traditional paradigms do not necessarily respect the power and potential of diversity (Gordon, 2009). The "ivory tower" has its own history and culture as an institution, and thus, African American women's leadership styles may not transfer smoothly or mesh exactly with academia. Further, when examining the progress of women of color in higher education, institutional research is generally categorized by gender or race, but rarely both. Gender data that combine all women without consideration of race and ethnicity obscures the impact of race on the progress of women of color (Hune, 2011).

The way we collect data is important and lends itself to policies and practice. Conducting more fine-grained research is warranted. This level of analysis may point the way toward strategies for increasing the population of underrepresented groups, including African American women, in areas of authority in academe. Considering the need for nuanced data to capture essential information about women faculty of color, both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are proposed.

Also, to contribute to the body of literature on the underrepresentation of African American women in senior-level leadership roles and to remedy the situation, it is imperative that we understand their leadership styles. Future research design might replicate Motha and Varghese's (2016) qualitative methods as described in their article: Rewriting dominant narratives of the academy: women faculty of color and identity management. The researchers report using narrative research to gather data through the collection of their stories and report their individual experiences relative to their multiple identities and roles as faculty in the academy. Similarly, Cobham and Patton (2015) conduct research to understand the role of self-efficacy among Black women faculty in achieving their career goals at predominantly White institutions, which they present in their article: Self-Will, power, and determination: A qualitative study of Black women faculty and the role of self-efficacy. Both research studies offer a valuable example of a qualitative approach and are carefully designed data-driven research. They also provide a model by which to address the lack of nuanced research on African American women's leadership in academe.

Finally, we need to better apprehend the contribution of women of color in leadership roles at this moment, especially in view of the ever-changing nature of demographics in academe. This critical examination of the complexities associated with the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions can point the way to a more inclusive and constructive academic environment.

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