

The Intersection of Blackness, Womanhood and Critical Spirituality

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Abstract

This research is intended to illuminate the influence of intersectionality as it relates to identity and systems of oppression on lived experiences, exclusively the connection between Blackness, Womanhood and Critical Spirituality. Intersectionality is defined as allowing the analysis of group and individual without either losing uniqueness (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Race, as defined by Andersen and Collins (2016), derives meaning and significance from specific social, historical, and political contexts (pg. 57). Gender is defined by Andersen and Collins (2016) as “rooted in social institutions and results in patterns within society that structure the relationships between women and men and that give them differing positions of advantage and disadvantage within institutions” (pg. 69). According to Agosto & Karanxha (2011) critical spirituality is:

“A pedagogy of integrity that recognizes all aspects of identities as opposed to fragmentation which occurs when educators only recognize the intellectual subjectivity of learners. Critical spiritual pedagogy works toward humanization as it counters fragmentation, Othering and exploitation to provide interdependent communities of support and love that uplift the capacity of others to act against oppression” (page 47).

The research question asks: *How do race, gender and critical spirituality interact to influence leadership decision-making in the school setting?* Thematic alignment of the literature revealed overarching trends, including: Critical Spirituality & God Consciousness; Identity and Permanence of Blackness; Intersectionality; Care and Community. These themes reveal the underlying dual motivation behind leadership and community-oriented actions of the Black Women Leaders within the literary studies. Social Justice and a sense of moral obligation to enact lasting and impactful change were fundamental pillars of study participants’ leadership behaviors. The investigation illustrates the influence of intersectionality on relationships, systems, and social constructs as well as the role of resilience and resistance within the context of school leadership.

Key words: Intersectionality, identity, race, gender, critical spirituality, blackness, womanhood, social justice, leadership, educational leadership

The broad topic originally selected for research was the impact of culturally responsive school leaders on the sense of belonging of students whose identities are within multiple oppressed or minoritized groups. The fluidity of both the range and expression of identities have a significant influence on education; it is imperative for leaders in this context to have a relevant understanding of the intricacies that impact the learning environment and school community. The interaction between identity and lived experience is reciprocal and inextricable from the educational experience. That leads to the development of the research question. Intersectionality is defined as allowing the analysis of group and individual without either losing uniqueness (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

Race is a social construct that impacts and influences society. Race shapes many aspects of our lived experiences within the context of the United States and certainly within the context of education. Race, as defined by Andersen and Collins (2016), derives meaning and significance from specific social, historical, and political contexts (pg. 57). In this particular investigation, race will be explored through the lens of Blackness. Gender is defined by Andersen and Collins (2016) as “rooted in social institutions and results in patterns within society that structure the relationships between women and men and that give them differing positions of advantage and disadvantage within institutions” (pg. 69). The influence of gender is manifest through lived experiences within the context of societal norms for men and women alike. Within the context of this investigation, the female experience will be another lens through which experiences are filtered. Critical spirituality is defined by Agosto & Karanxha (2011) as:

“A pedagogy of integrity that recognizes all aspects of identities as opposed to fragmentation which occurs when educators only recognize the intellectual subjectivity of learners. Critical spiritual pedagogy works toward humanization as it counters fragmentation, Othering and exploitation to provide interdependent communities of support and love that uplift the capacity of others to act against oppression” (page 47).

These elements are all essential in shaping one’s ability to navigate various circumstances as they come and engage in constructive ways with others and the surrounding environment. So, the layering and intersection of these three—Blackness, Femininity, and Critical Spirituality—establish the vantage point from which the research topic is approached. The research question for the purposes of this investigation is as follows:

How do race, gender and critical spirituality interact to influence leadership decision-making in the school setting?

In wanting to more deeply investigate the factors that influence leadership, the research topic for the purposes of this paper were adjusted to adequately reflect this lens. Instead of explicitly focusing on the impact felt by students within various oppressed groups as a result of leadership, the emphasis was shifted to reflect the intersection of the identity of leaders on the decisions they make within their role. Interested in the perspective of the lived experiences of Black women, its multifaceted nature, intricacies, the experiential intersectionality for the purposes of this particular research process became clear. The precise interaction investigated was of Black women exhibiting critical spirituality within their leadership.

In order to find information specific to the desired intersection for investigation, several searches were conducted. A preliminary search sorted through articles, dissertations and proposals that included the terms “intersectionality” and “educational leadership.” The purpose of this particular search inquiry was to establish a broad range of sources that could serve as the starting point for further, more detailed inquiries. After reading, “Resistance Meets Spirituality in Academia: ‘I Prayed on It!’” (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011), it became clear the influence of critical spirituality should be included, as the influence of faith in leadership was not a factor previously explored. The

next inquiry included the terms “intersectionality,” “educational leadership,” and “critical spirituality.” The terms within this inquiry yielded results aligned to the experiences of people of color within various leadership roles in education. Articles pertaining to men, articles discussing gender expression, sexual orientation or the role, experiences of teachers and students within the context of education were eliminated from the articles listed within the inquiry. The resulting research findings were analyzed for patterns and thematically aligned.

Research Findings

Critical Spirituality & God Consciousness

In order to address the reality of the taboo nature of spirituality within public settings, there is a need to embrace spirituality's ability to ground our worldview (Cannon & Morton, 2015). Additionally, engaging "in public discourse about our spirituality and its relationship to education, to continue to invite others to the conversation, and to recognize how the discourse might influence our discussions" (Cannon & Morton, 2015, p. 149) allows us to see the impact it has on our roles and capacities as leaders and agents of change. Whether or not a person identifies as internalizing any set of espoused religious values, their expressed spirituality manifests in their relationships and impacts their decision making because "...spirituality is relational and underpins all ethics" (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011, p. 46). Leaders in the spiritual space navigate a nuanced experience, like a tightrope, as it impacts students (Beckwith et al., 2016).

This respect for student and stakeholder identity and spiritual comfort while navigating the core of self is central to the manifestation and demonstration of care. There is an aspect of groundedness that comes from self-awareness and connectivity to one's guiding principles, particularly as they are inextricably connected to all aspects of identity and action. "I know that my early experiences with my graduate mentor continue to help me balance my spiritual, gender, and racial identities in the academy" (Cannon & Morton, 2015, p. 148). This directly speaks to the power of both mentorship and how each identity noted in the quote, spirituality, gender and race, present themselves in both the academic and leadership realms. A participant in one of the studies, when discussing all that it takes to give students what they need, "They need some Jesus, too, and I do the best I can without getting fired..." (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 226). This demonstrates a level of commitment to all aspects of life, particularly the ability to strengthen the sense of self and decision making as a steward of the school.

There is a reliance on God in times of stress and disillusionment to invoke clarity (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011). "...These women not only believed in ensuring the academic well-being of their students, but also in providing holistic care of mind, body and spirit. The care these principals engaged in sought to address interlocking systems of material, community, and spiritual realities" (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 224). Explaining experiences during a time in the academy, Cannon & Morton (2015) write, "the materials I read in my master's program coursework assaulted my mind and tagged my character with insulting stereotypes, which in turn, pulled my emotions and scattered the logic gained from my faith" (Cannon & Morton, 2015, p. 150). Imagine this compounded with the realities of small-minded thinking on the part of peers (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Even when not in writing or the context of the academy, stereotypes have the same kind of influence on both emotions and memories connected to previous experiences with prejudice and bias against Black Women in positions of legitimate or perceived power and influence (Andersen & Collins, 2016). In these cases, God consciousness and critical spirituality have the ability to relieve such pressures and propel the recipient of such stigmas and stereotypes beyond the accepted boundaries (Cannon & Morton, 2015).

Balanced with a focus on developing solutions and directly addressing issues of racism, inequity and injustice, impact is inevitable, as a principal highlighted in a study shares, "I hold on to prayer, that's the only thing that can get me through even when the people are acting crazy" (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011, p. 53). Provisions must be made in order for current and aspiring leaders to be empowered with the wisdom and tools to make positive inroads for those experiencing oppression on multiple levels (Khalifa et al., 2016). "The question we have for the academy is what steps and structures do administrators in higher education institutions implement to act as buffers for Black women, for they continue to be vulnerable regardless of their position/success" (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011, p. 59). Additionally, the alignment and action of allies in positions of privilege also has the authority to provoke lasting change.

Identity and Permanence of Blackness

The pressure of being an African American woman in certain spaces is difficult to bear; it is learned early on that in order to be accepted it is necessary to assimilate (Beckwith et al., 2016). When thinking about the experiences which solidify the reality of the Black experience, particularly that of women in positions of leadership, it is negligent to ignore a component impacting intersectionality and the differences experienced by those who may share one or more oppressed identity. Illuminating the difference in the experience between Black Women Beckwith et al. (2016) write, "White women may experience gender discrimination, whereas African American women may experience both gender and racial discrimination. The joint possibility of gender and racial discrimination makes it impossible for African American women to make accurate causal attributions concerning potential discrimination..." (Beckwith, Carter & Peters, 2016, p. 122). Ignoring these differences is irresponsible.

These factors are influencers of the dependence of Black women leaders whose experiences have been investigated in the literature highlighted for the purpose of this investigation to engage in God conscious practices (Cannon & Morton, 2015) and critical spirituality. The experience of 'not being heard' and 'undervalued' can only be overcome when racial group dynamics are broken through communication and cooperation (Mayer, 2017). This resilience is demonstrated throughout the writings analyzed; there exists a commitment to quell those feelings of low self-worth and ineffectiveness of voice for students and staff members. The leaders highlighted demonstrate a commitment to constructive conversations, no matter how uncomfortable or difficult, for the sake of addressing the totality of issues that influence student performance and learning.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, there are invisible intellectual obstacles facing Black Women in leadership, as detailed within the analyzed literature. "Black people have to have degrees for people to believe in their intellectual abilities" (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011. p. 57). Even as Blacks are progressing or demonstrating capacity for particular roles within the realm of education, and society as a whole, intellectual ability as viewed through the attainment of higher-level degrees is seen as more valuable. This represents an imposition of classism and racism (Andersen & Collins, 2016). The collusion of these social constructs serves to legitimize the need for an increased awareness of lived experiences for those in the school setting, especially for Blacks currently in positions of leadership and those with leadership aspirations.

Intersectionality

The interpretation of one's narrative is shaped by the layers of identity and experience (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011). There is a level of intentionality required to determine the ways various, and potentially endless, combinations of identities interact with normative social constructs and

norms. This includes, and is not limited to, examination of self by educators in addition to investigation of those serving in the capacity of educator, community member, and change agent. It is demonstrated repeatedly, the concept that intersectionality is not to be taken lightly or viewed in isolation; rather, allows for understanding as a combined category (Mayer, 2017). Additionally, a recurring theme is the idea that "inequities surrounding culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other differences still exist in the United States that impact educators and the students and communities they serve"(Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 220).

Care and Community

Though there are various iterations of what care is and how it can look, one way of approaching it, particularly in the school setting, is as "liberating others from their state of need and actively promoting their welfare (Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004, p. 4)" (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 228). This can be in the choice of curricula, teacher professional development opportunities or the approach to difficult conversations. All aspects of educational leadership, whether directly or indirectly addressing student need, serve to contribute to any growth made in the school context.

There is a level of engagement within and without the school context that directly impacts the lives of students. A principal within a study illustrates "I tried to become a part of the life they lived... They got to see me; they got to know me. They got to talk to me and they got to see I'm just like y'all" (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 227). Visibility of school leaders is important because trust is an essential component to building and maintaining community (Khalifa, 2012). Without an investment outside of the school context, it becomes difficult to establish rapport with students, families and stakeholders (Khalifa, et al., 2016). Authentic community engagement is invaluable.

What is demonstrated through the research is the nuanced ways in which Black women lead, especially those grounded in critical spirituality as it manifests their passion for social justice (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011; Khalifa, et al., 2016; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Layering the notion of critical spirituality on the aspect of care yields a concern for the spiritual development within care for the whole child (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). This theme emerged as a trend in the articles utilized for the purposes of this investigation.

Beyond the focus on academic achievement and test scores, participation in the holistic development of wellness and nurturing of extended family networks is the role and presence of the Black Mother (Sakho, 2017). This level and depth of care within the role of the leaders depicted in the research serves to develop the individual as well as the community as a whole. (Sakho, 2017; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). "The support of these Black women in her personal and professional spheres has had a profound influence on her sense of worth and capacity. It has shaped the way she now works with graduate students and young scholars as she is committed to 'paying it forward'" (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011, p. 52). Furthermore, the idea of mentorship and sponsorship is essential in education fields and other contexts in order to minimize the isolation and barriers experienced (Beckwith, Carter & Peters, 2016). There is strength in the lessons shared across generations from other mothers to their daughters, a characteristic of emancipatory systems and strategies of spiritual militancy. Typically these systems of knowledge practice mothering and leadership beyond the biological function (Sakho, 2017). When compounded by critical spirituality and moral obligation, there is sustainability, longevity established within the context of the leadership. This level of consistency is particularly impactful in school settings (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Discussion

“...Further research is needed in order to understand how female leaders negotiate gender and race in historically sexist and racist work environments” (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011, p. 45). As much as it is not identified as such, schools are spaces established in the expectation of serving white families with students best suited to learn; they were expressly created for that end (Fisher, 2015). Thinking that equitable expectations can be re-established for the success of those for whom the construct of school was not created without unearthing the harsh truths is negligent and irresponsible.

"Ordinary, everyday administrative practices must become more of a focal point in understanding how administrators actually engage in the process of social justice" (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 229). Leveraging the current research in this area has the potential to lend itself to a more comprehensive understanding of the daily-lived experiences of administrators of color, particularly Black Women with grounding in Critical Spirituality. This insight could serve as a means to systematizing the leadership decisions made to enact social justice. Systematic replication is not the ideal answer to the generational issues facing students and leaders of color; however, it can be a starting point, as emulation and replication have the ability to develop an internalization of what social justice requires (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

It is ideal to establish a clear moral frame and sense of obligation that facilitates the navigation of action that protects and maintains caring communities where relationships matter (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). Their innate leadership and sense of self, guided by equity and morality, qualify these leaders. It is interesting to note that in not making explicit reference to a specific theory or leadership preparation program in shaping their equity-focused leadership, rather their actions are directed by their sense of moral obligation (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Khalifa, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Ultimately, what emerged was a trend and overarching theme of social justice as the impetus for actionable change within the leadership of the women studied. Social justice, as enacted through educational leadership, is context-specific because the responses to injustice will require leadership vision, as opposed to prescribed practices (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). The depth and profundity found in the actions taken by Black women grounded in their critically spiritual selves demonstrates the power of intersectionality as it impacts intra and interpersonal relationships, community building and the development of educational settings grounded in social justice and equity.

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