Chapter 26
The Challenges and Responsibilities of White Women in Leadership:
Strategies for Interrogating Whiteness in Higher Education

Tenisha Tevis

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8963-280X

Oregon State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Drawing on a larger study that initiated a dialogue about race and inclusion, the author examined the challenges and responsibilities of White women in higher education leadership through the lens of critical race theory. Though there is a need for women, from a feminist perspective, to confront the trend that higher education leadership continues to be White and male, there is more so a need for White women to interrogate the normative and oppressive nature of Whiteness. Because Whiteness is said to be overlooked within the narrative of feminism, White women are accused of perpetuating racism. Yet, very little research explores what happens when White women, particularly in higher education leadership, interrogate Whiteness. Contributing to the bodies of research on feminism, racism, Whiteness, and leadership within the context of higher education, the author presents strategies that could address the polarizing effects of feminism; discusses implications that go beyond institutional type; and provides directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, "higher education has always been hostile toward diversity and inclusion" (Tevis, 2018, p. 7). Such spaces have had an explicit and a missional relationship to exclusion (Eckel & King, 2007), which has made the idea of women in higher education leadership a tenuous concept. While feminism

recognizes the structural oppression of patriarchy on the status of women (Frankenberg, 1993), in its inception, however, it discounted the role Whiteness—briefly, the pretext for White social status (Frankenberg, 1993; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2002)—played in the plight of other women and men of color. With that, the prospects of women obtaining a leadership position in higher education, compounded by race, is at best a challenge, or at worse, non-existent.

Though having faced many obstacles, women assuming positions in higher education leadership is on the rise. However, such gains are the achievement of predominantly White women; women of color remain underrepresented in leadership positions (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016). While special interests groups and prior research acknowledge all groups of women continue to lag behind [White] men in leadership (AAUW, 2016; Bilen-Green, Froelich, & Jacobson, 2008), it is minimally addressed that "women of color confront race and ethnic discrimination that White women do not face, they also experience gender bias differently than White women do" (AAUW, 2016, p. 6). So while [White] women have fought for equality and challenged exclusion they have, however, been unaware as to how Whiteness has led to differentiated structural oppression; thus linking feminism to the perpetuation of racism. Being aware of Whiteness would shift feminist discourse from that of victimology (Ware, 1992) and the incessant practice of racial exclusion, to a strategic resolve of "White culture" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 195). For far too long feminism has solely focused on gender, and disdain for misogyny, rather than disputation of prejudicial practices of White men, writ large, and the development of strategies to thwart systemic oppression.

It is clear there is a need for women, from a feminist perspective, to confront the persistent trend that higher education leadership has always been and continues to be White and male (Khwaja, 2017). Yet, within the *well-meaning*—assumed to be paved with good intentioned—narrative of feminism, there is more so the need for White women to acknowledge and question the normative (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016; Frankenberg, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and oppressive nature of Whiteness, as opposed to just gender discrimination. Gusa (2010) explained that the "unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow [predominately White institutions (PWI)] to remain racialized" (p. 465). To that end, drawing from the literature and data collected from a larger study that initiated a dialogue about race, gender, leadership, and inclusion at a private PWI, the author explores the challenges and responsibilities of White women in higher education leadership who interrogate Whiteness, specifically, the "White cultural practices" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 194 & p. 233) embedded within. While the criticisms of feminism are vast, and the research on Whiteness is longstanding, both bodies of literature minimally explore White women leaders and White culture, together or respectively, particularly at the postsecondary level.

Significance of the Chapter

The relationship between feminism and Whiteness persists, which makes strategies for challenging White cultural practices, within the context of higher education leadership, far and few in between. Such is still needed for how, namely White women, not only "think through race" (Frankenberg, 1993, p.137) but challenge the oppressive nature of [White] men, and the repressive practices of Whiteness, out of which higher education was developed. And yet, little scholarship pays attention to how White women recognize and interrogate Whiteness, specifically the cultural practices thereof, and does so primarily from a higher education leadership position. Therefore, the author explored what happens when White women administrators name Whiteness as problematic within the system of higher education. Explic-

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