

Chapter 42

Interlocking Systems of Oppression: Women Navigating Higher Education Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Women in higher education face many challenges as they navigate senior-level administrative positions on college campuses. Much of the existing research on women's leadership in higher education does not highlight the ways in which women of varying overlapping identities navigate leadership uniquely. In this chapter, the authors discuss the need for the theories of intersectionality and positionality, which foreground the intersection of many identities and further contextualize them within systems of power. Through an analysis of existing empirical work, this chapter draws attention to tools and strategies that can be learned from women of multiple oppressed identities and positions of leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Women in higher education face various challenges as they navigate leadership on campuses dominated by masculine standards, structures and culture (Airini, Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson, & Wilson, 2011). In this chapter, we address how women leaders from multiple marginalized identities navigate the everyday realities of interlocking systems of oppression. It is particularly important to look at women's intersectional experiences because of the ways in which one's social identities are inextricably tied to exercise of power and result in very different experiences and ways woman need to respond to be successful¹.

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Since the 1970s, studies have identified challenges for women as it relates to stereotypes of inferiority as leaders (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990; Rosener 1990). Over time, studies also examined how racism played a key role for women leaders of color (Fitzgerald 2003; Waring 2003). The social identities of leaders began to be explored in much more complex ways. In the years that followed, studies explored Black women, Latina women, lesbian women and women from different social class backgrounds for example. Studies examined issues that were important as they enacted leadership and the challenges they faced (Ayman 1993; Garner 2004; Kezar 2000a, 2000b, 2002a, 2002b). For example, women of color often rate themselves lower in leadership growth and abilities, in comparison to counterparts who are men (Kezar and Moriarty 2000). These studies also provided information about the experiences and hindrances that women from different backgrounds face. In the early years, studies focused mostly on women, then mostly on race or another singular identity and less so about how multiple social identities impact leadership or on the power associated with different identities.

Through an analysis of existing empirical work, we hope to draw scholarly and practitioner attention to strategies that can be learned from women of multiple identities in leadership. We discuss the need for theories such as intersectionality and positionality,² which foreground the intersection of many identities and further contextualize them within systems of power. We argue that intersectionality and positionality provide an avenue for helping women leaders be successful by better understanding the multiple factors or conditions they need to navigate. Therefore, our discussion seeks to generate both practical and theoretical knowledge of leadership strategies that can be applied by women of multiple oppressed identities. This chapter provides empirical and conceptual examples of how an understanding of positionality and intersectionality helps to navigate power conditions and oppression.

SINGLE AXIS OF OPPRESSION

Identity is often understood from a singular viewpoint, particularly within explorations of women's leadership in higher education literature. Due to the complexity of studying multiple social identities, early research tended to isolate and focus on a single dimension of identity - gender, race, social class or sexual orientation. We review this earlier research to demonstrate some of the salient experiences that emerge from these studies. The studies shed light on particular challenges (e.g. visibility of race, homophobia) and opportunities (e.g. alliance with other woman of color, invisibility of sexual orientation) experienced by particular identity features. These studies provide a backdrop and foundation for understanding the importance of multiple identities being explored simultaneously.

Research that hones in to explore a single social identity is certainly useful, but not realistic in practice. All people encompass multiple identities. Therefore, scholars should not mistake the knowledge of a single identity, as the experience of a whole person. Viewing identity from a singular lens of analysis often times leads to a one-dimensional perspective of how a person navigates more than one marginalized identity. This is limiting in that the experiences of those most privileged within a marginalized group, often time become the priority when addressing systemic inequities (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). For example, race becomes associated with Black men and gender is often limited to the experiences of white³ women. These associations are a result of scholarship that investigates along a single axis of oppression. In the following sections we highlight research that has been done on single identity categories. Categories we explore, include gender, race, sexual orientation and class.

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