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Black Women's Leadership Development: Implications for their Representation in the Political Arena

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Abstract: *This paper traces Black women's leadership development experiences overtime and the relevant socio-political linkages that help to explain why Black women continue to remain largely underrepresented in political leadership at the state and national levels. Attending to Black women's leadership development needs is critical to increasing their representation in politics.*

Introduction

A growing body of research exists on understanding Black women's leadership experiences in the context of management positions in higher education and corporate America (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst Research, 1998). However, a paucity of literature exists focusing on Black women's political leadership experiences and how they develop the skills that are necessary to obtain and succeed in political leadership roles. Furthermore, the research that does exist is characteristically anecdotal and does not offer critical analyses of Black women's leadership experiences in the political sphere. Of even greater concern is that the research on women's leadership experiences in general tends to group women together—as a monolithic group—not accounting for the racial and cultural differences that exist not only in their leadership experiences but also in how they lead. As such, this paper explores the literature on Black women as leaders, in particular, the process through which they develop their political leadership skills, and how historical socio-political factors affect their path to seeking and securing political leadership roles.

Black Women's Ways of Leading

In the last decade, greater attention has been focused on Black women's unique leadership experiences and the complex process through which they come to political leadership (Allen, 1997; Baraka-Love, 1986; Githens & Prestage, 1977; Gostnell, 1997; Rogers, 1998, 2003; Scott, 1982). Historically, Black women have held positions of leadership in organizations “whose mission is institutional change” such as the NAACP and the SCLC (Collins, 2000). Additional evidence shows that Black women activists hold a decidedly different standpoint from the traditional and contemporary conceptions of ‘leadership’ about the use of power through leadership, including the purpose and role of a leader. For example, Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer held unique ideas about leadership and empowerment in the Black community whereby it was her belief that a leader is responsible for cultivating and developing more leaders, and in promoting group solidarity (Allen, 1997). Although she did not hold a formal position of authority with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the model of leadership she exercised reveals the considerable power she held which was a result of her viewpoint on social change (Galambos & Hughes, 2001; Collins, 2000). In other words, Hamer effectively challenged and held the Democratic Party of Mississippi accountable for taking the necessary steps to ensure that *all* people of Mississippi were fairly represented. In so doing, she challenged the White and Black male leadership who held the general belief that women and certainly Black women could work behind the scenes, but that they should not try to come forward and lead.

During Hamer's involvement in the formation of MFDP and the preceding years Black women had to contend with overt sexism from Black men and race, sex, and class oppression from White men and women (Giddings, 1984; Marble, 1990), which forced them to create safe havens from the hostile environment that prohibited personal growth and community survival (Allen, 1997). Black women, as a result, developed a "culture of political resistance" that required them to "expand their roles as homemakers and laborers to incorporate that of 'caretakers' of the race" (Allen, 1997, p. 2; Giddings, 1984; Collins, 2000). Black female leadership was therefore cultivated and operationalized by their role in the family and the community (i.e., churches, schools, political organizations). In essence, Black female leadership developed from and continues to be shaped by both the external and internal forces that affect their everyday lived experiences.

Interruptions in Black Women's Path to Political Leadership

Research within the career development field and other academic disciplines have identified environmental factors contributing to Black women's career development success and impediments to their success (Alfred, 2001; Baraka-Love, 1989; Beach-Duncan, 2004; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Erhart, 1990; Gostnell, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2001) which have implications for the developmental process Black women go through or should go through in preparation for seeking and serving in political leadership roles. Consistently mentioned as factors contributing to Black women's career development success were multiple mentors, peer networks, strategic career planning, and individual perseverance. The barriers frequently cited are gendered socialization practices, perceptions of women's positionality, and the interlocking system of racism, sexism, and classism.

Another common barrier is the ubiquitous glass ceiling effect, or what many women of color describe as the unbreakable barriers of plexiglas, teflon, and the concrete ceiling (Beach-Duncan, 2004; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Brown, 2000; Catalyst, 1998). According to Catalyst (1998), a nonprofit research and advisory organization based in New York, the glass ceiling is defined as social, organizational, and attitudinal barriers that restrict access to both top-level managerial positions and middle-management positions. However more elusive is the concrete ceiling in which women of color reported to be more difficult to penetrate and that they cannot see through it to glimpse the corner office (Catalyst, 1998). Like the glass ceiling phenomenon in the professions, the concrete ceiling concept applies to Black women's efforts to seek political office in that they cannot see through the concrete barrier to get a glimpse of certain executive-level political leadership roles at the local, state, and national levels.

Political Concrete Ceiling

Women aspiring to high level elected and appointed positions hinges on the same environmental factors related to success in the professions, mentors, access to training opportunities, visibility, ect. However, several studies have identified "the pipeline" issue as a particularly strong explanation for why women, and women of color in particular remain underrepresented at the national level (Kropf & Boiney, 2001; Palmer & Simon, 2001) Palmer and Simon's (2001) study of the social and environmental factors that influence women's decisions to become a political candidate revealed,

In the American electoral arena, there is a hierarchy of political offices that serves as a career ladder for elected officials....In other words, politicians begin their careers serving in local and state offices before running for Congress. Thus, once women begin serving

in these lower political offices in greater numbers, only then will we see serious increases in the number of women in the House, and eventually in the Senate... (p. 61)

Another factor preventing women from entering the pipeline is “sex-role socialization” (Githens & Prestage, 1977; Higgenbotham, 1994, 2000; Jennings, 1991). The research of Palmer and Simon (2001), McGlen and O’Connor (1998), and Williams (1990) indicate that women have been traditionally socialized to pursue female dominated careers (i.e., nursing and teaching) typically viewed as “less compatible” with politics than in male dominated careers (law and business) viewed as most compatible. “Recently, many women have been successful precisely because they come from fields other than law, such as health and education,” report Palmer and Simon (2001, p. 61). Nevertheless, as a result of limited access to the pipeline women’s representation at the national level will remain marginal.

Another line of research emphasizes the power of incumbency in discouraging women to run for office. For example, Palmer and Simon (2001) assert that women are less likely to participate in primary and general elections in greater numbers if they have to compete against an incumbent. Uncontested races tend to attract greater numbers of women candidates. Therefore, the likelihood of success influences women’s decisions to become a candidate.

As evidenced the political glass ceiling does not differ substantially from the ceiling present in the professions, the context is merely different. The section that follows provides a more extensive review of the more pervasive barriers impeding Black women from securing political leadership roles.

Barriers

Research shows that factors contributing to political activity among Black women and the strategies they can use to achieve and maintain political leadership roles are directly related to their experiences with racism, sexism, and classism (Brown, 1994; Gill, 1997; Prestage, 1991; Rogers; 1998; Smooth, 2001). The research profiling the backgrounds of persons more likely to seek and be elected to office consistently mentions certain political cues such as high social status and income (Barrett, 1997; Darcy & Hadley, 1988; Prestage, 1991). Education, professional occupation, and activity in voluntary and community groups have also been associated with political ambition because of contacts gained, potential visibility, and leadership made possible (Barrett, 1997).

Researchers Darcy and Hadley (1988), Perkins (1986), and Fowlkes (1984) argue that women in politics today were countersocialized away from the prevailing norms of political women. This could be associated with the presence of a politically active mother available as a role model or encouraging father; others are stimulated by the women’s movement to move away from traditionally defined roles (Perkins, 1986). Age, too, is associated with political ambition. We see women waiting later in life to seek elected office. This is due to in part to gendered socialization norms, and family and career obligations. With respect to Black women’s political activity in nontraditional political leadership roles, Perkins (1986) argues they are more likely to be driven into politics due to life circumstances (i.e., racism, economic and educational inequality, and sexism).

Reid-Merritt (1996) interviewed over 40 successful Black female leaders (33 employed in the public arena and 12 were leaders in corporate America) whom she titled phenomenal women. These women were self-assured, aggressive and assertive, race-conscious and serious about social justice and change, held a high degree of self-efficacy, and demonstrated a deep sense of resilience. From the interviews she conducted, it became apparent that although the

women did not demonstrate “perfectly similar life patterns,” they did share seven core characteristics that made them unique as a group of powerful women leaders. The women had strong support of family, church, school, and community. Along with possessing an intense focus on clearly identified goals, political sophistication, and a spiritual foundation, they also possessed a strong sense of identity and self-worth as Blacks and women. The final shared leadership characteristic is that all the women were socially conscious and dedicated to a social agenda that transcended personal gain. Although not listed as a core characteristic, Reid-Merritt (1996) acknowledges that all of the women in her study had mentors ranging from spiritual a higher being to family members to professional colleagues.

Rajoppi’s (1993) research suggests that successful women politicians tend to demonstrate a high level of motivation, which is most critical since politics is still a difficult field for women to enter. Among elected and appointed political officeholders, research shows that in comparison to men, women in general tend to have more political leadership experience prior to acquiring an elected office (Rajoppi, 1993; Thomas & Wilcox, 1998). Rajoppi (1993) states further,

Although women elected officials are less likely than men to have held previous elective offices, they are more likely than men to have held appointed positions in government, to have worked in political campaigns, and to have served on the staff of an elected official. (p. 7)

With respect to Black women, they traditionally enter politics at the grassroots level advocating a specific cause (Cohen, 2003; Darcy & Hadley, 1988; Githens & Prestage, 1977). Overall, most fundamental to Black women securing and succeeding in political leadership roles is that they must acknowledge and prepare themselves for barriers that stem from the confluence of race and gender stereotypes. Collectively, with self-confidence and strong self-esteem, thick skin, and strong professional and personal support networks, Black women are better equipped to maneuver themselves successfully around these barriers. Additionally, volunteering on political campaigns to learn the fundamentals of running for office, serving in community leadership roles (boards, professional associations and networks), and acquiring mentors are other important variables to their success.

Conclusion

As evidenced, Black women have overcome numerous obstacles, moving from negative gender and racial stereotyping to being considered sophisticated candidates able to attract broad political support (Asante, 2000). Noticeably, however, with these gains Black women’s political leadership experiences remain understudied (Darcy & Hadley, 1988; Giddings, 1984; Githens & Prestage, 1977; Gostnell, 1997; Smooth, 2001) and they continue to be denied access to certain top-level leadership positions at the state and national levels. Because Black women represent a significant pool of potential leadership, studying their leadership development experiences in entering the political arena will help inform educators and the public on the best strategies and approaches to use to help Black women develop political leadership skills. Finally, Black women remain one of the largest groups in society whose talents and skills remain largely devalued or underdeveloped and as a result, they are subjected to numerous social and attitudinal barriers that prevent them from securing and succeeding in not only the political arena but also other leadership contexts traditionally controlled by males. Studying this population’s leadership development experiences is critical to breaking this cycle of subjugation.

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