ARTICLE 4

Okay, You "Get It…" Whiteness, Masculinity, and the Development of Critical Consciousness in Leadership Development

Conor P. McLaughin[1], Keenan Colquitt, Jr.[2]

[1] Center for Inclusive Excellence, San Diego State University

[2] National Center for Institutional Diversity, University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

This article will situate the development of critical consciousness within practices of leadership and as a conduit for building a commitment to justice. Authors will focus on how this can be developed in those who are situated in privileged positions in systems of power.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has always concerned itself with making change. The earliest theories of leadership focused on the achievements of men who gained prominence in their societies (Zaccaro, 2014) which was used to obtain greater social influence and control over others. The ability to amass such power along with the capacity to wield became synonymous with greatness. These historic men became benchmarks against which many men would be measured for hundreds of years to come.

More recent theories focus on self-reflection and the dynamics of groups to tackle systemic problems facing the future of humanity (Heifetz, 1994), reconceptualizing power as the environment and the systems in which leaders must operate instead of an innate trait or a skill to be acquired. Leadership is then a means for people, groups, and organizations to

navigate power structures and social systems, a tool to implement change, and a vehicle to disrupt the status quo. A variety of world events have also brought leadership and its role in activism to greater visibility around the world (Museus et al., 2017).

These emergent approaches to leadership often insist that all members of a society examine their relationship to the status quo to move from a place of complacency toward a capacity for influencing change. People advantaged by the ways current power structures operate likely experience a great deal of fear and anxiety at the idea that how they live their lives and have achieved any level of success will need to be changed for others to succeed (Heifetz, 1994). Understanding this, many emergent theories of leadership emphasize the importance of self-reflection as part of the change process (e.g., Dugan, 2017).

There have also been several calls for leadership scholars and educators to offer a more critical examination of the ways in which systems of power have shaped the values around which the "greatness" of "leaders" was evaluated (Dugan, 2017; Dugan & Henderson, 2021; Tapia-Fusilier & Irwin, 2019). Thus, a capacity for critical self-reflection is key to learning about and practicing leadership in which social justice and positive change is a priority. Critical self-reflection is the first step to challenging systems of power and the status quo; it places a great deal of importance on the systems and one's relationship to them. To practice leadership and create change, people must first understand how their own values, beliefs, and assumptions are tied up in the status quo; they must first change themselves.

This self-reflection needs to be in service of something greater than an increased awareness as an end in and of itself. In the first article in this issue (Mitchell et al.), the authors present the core elements of the SALT model in which *critical consciousness* is a key element. In this article, we argue that developing a critical consciousness is a step toward the development of a commitment to justice. This commitment to justice, which the SALT model describes as building on a capacity for empathy to understand the systemic nature and impact

of oppression (Museus et al., 2017), can inform action that can work toward building a more equitable, just society in which people are valued, validated, and empowered (Bell, 2016). We situate this development within a longer journey of leadership learning and development that focuses on capacity building, personal development, and values-oriented commitment to collective action toward justice (Museus et al., 2017). In this article, we will situate the development of critical consciousness within practices of leadership and as a conduit for building a commitment to justice (Museus, et al., 2017). We will particularly focus on how this can be developed in those who are situated in privileged positions in systems of power, as we believe it is especially important for developing a different kind of leadership capacity for social justice.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Understanding the nature of oppression is key to practicing leadership (Museus et al., 2017) because these dynamics will inevitably impact the work of any group and the relationships among the people who make up groups. While a call for greater self-reflection on one's location within systems of power and oppression is growing within leadership (Dugan, 2017; Dugan & Henderson, 2021), consciousness raising has been central to activist work for decades (hooks, 1994).

Even within spaces where consciousness raising was a central tenet there was a need to examine the complexities of social location within and among groups. The Combahee River Collective (1977) argued that within feminist spaces there was a dire need to address the dynamics of race and the impact of whiteness on group dynamics. Even as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has become a part of the common lexicon, many still decry it as an expression of a hierarchy of oppression. This, of course, misses the point of the term, to examine the nexus of power at which each person is situated and how that shapes their experiences as members of multiple groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Wijeyesinghe & Jones,

2014). In all these cases, the theorists are urging those with power to be aware of how power is situated and how it shapes participation in groups.

Developing consciousness in people with privilege

We believe it is important for those practicing leadership to explore the importance of developing a critical consciousness and self-reflective capacity in those with multiple privileged identities. Often, privileged identities encourage a way of understanding the world rooted in ignorance and denial of difference, assuming a universality of experience against which differences are judged (Cabrera, 2012). It is, then, important to examine a few groups who receive privilege in many social systems (most importantly in higher education in the United States). This will help to examine these power structures, to highlight the importance of situating the importance of cultivating critical consciousness within those who currently benefit from the status quo, and to connect these processes to developing capacity for leadership that does not reinvest in the status quo.

The authors of this article believe critical consciousness to be particularly important. We both experience privilege in a variety of ways including both identifying as heterosexual, cisgender men. We are both employed, hold terminal degrees, and primarily operate in prosperous social structures, which affords us privileged status within a variety of spaces. We also experience these aspects of identity in different ways because of other aspects of who we are and those identities' locations within systems of power and oppression. Author 1 identifies as white, upper-middle class, and as having a learning disability. Author 2 identifies as Black, upper-middle class, and has multiple learning disabilities. We believe it is a necessity and responsibility to write and work toward disrupting the systems of oppression from which we benefit. We acknowledge the importance of understanding the interactions of our privileged identities with our marginalized identities because how we experience

oppression is also shaped by how we experience privilege; and, because our marginalized identities challenge us to disrupt hegemony.

Whiteness.

Whiteness, like many identities, is complex. It can be defined as both an identity, a way of understanding racial categorizations related to specific skin tones and features, which has morphed and evolved across history and context. Whiteness is also a system of power in which social advantage can be conferred for participating and upholding societal norms (Cobham, 2011). In the United States, this power is deeply tied to the history of enslavement, indigenous genocide, and anti-Blackness in which people who were categorized as not white and who refused to uphold anti-Black social systems were deemed killable and societally unnecessary (Harris, 1993). Thus, whiteness (as informed by Nash, 2019) can be understood as a set of physical features and actions

- which grant varying levels of access to a system of power,

- in which people of all races can and do participate,

- which normalizes sets of experiences and perspectives that view Blackness and Black people, as well as other people of color, as socially disposable, killable, and counter to sustaining the lives of white people and whiteness.

Power, privilege, and whiteness.

The power of whiteness is, first and foremost, in the lack of awareness of its power to those who embody and benefit from it. DuBois (1903/2007) discussed the ways in which Black people needed to employ a double-consciousness to understand their own world and the world of white people, whereas white people only needed to understand the world they were assuming to be universal. Scholars of race and higher education have continually described this power as an assumption of normality (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This is not, however, the extent of this privilege. The privileges afforded white people include access to

property of a host of forms (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Harris, 1993) and the ability to experience social interactions without fear of many forms of racialized harassment.

These privileges connect whiteness and leadership. The historically "great leaders" discussed earlier in this article were almost entirely people who would now be understood as white. Even when great people who are not white have achieved markers of success it has been by achieving success in historically white arenas and besting mostly or entirely white competition (e.g., Barack Obama being elected President of the United States). Often capacity for leadership is situated and examined within folks' ability to navigate and achieve within whiteness (Tapia-Fusilier & Irwin, 2019).

It is also important to understand that whiteness interacts with the multiplicity of other identities and the variety of systems of power within which those identities are situated. Whiteness can shape the experiences of power and oppression people experience through their other identities, such as their gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation to name only a few. Scholarship on these intersections of identity illustrates the ways that single-identity analysis of issues fails to account for the experiences of people multiply marginalized (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) offered intersectionality to bring awareness to the experiences of Black women who experience both racism and sexism when analysis of only racism or only sexism fails to capture their realities. It important to note that intersectionality does not simply describe the intersections of identities, but the multiple nexuses of power in which identities are situated and the resulting consequences shaped by institutional factors (Crenshaw, 1991; Wijeyesinghe & Stewart, 2022). This further underscores the importance of this concept for leadership. For people who are white, a critical consciousness for practicing leadership will not only require an awareness and capacity for reflection on their whiteness, but a capacity for examining how whiteness shapes the ways they experience the rest of their identities and vice versa.

Applying theory to practice.

For many years U S. scholars and practitioners in higher education have been exploring ways to incorporate challenges to whiteness (and systems of power more broadly) into practice. This work is an ongoing, dynamic process and goal, much like the broader work of social justice (Bell, 2016). Educators in higher education can and should create spaces to continually examine whiteness and its role in meaning making, in and beyond classrooms throughout student experiences (Reason et al., 2005).

These spaces can be supportive while cultivating opportunities to be challenged to reflect more deeply on whiteness (Reason et al., 2005). These spaces of exploration need to happen across campus and across the variety of student experiences (McLaughlin, 2017) because often students will experience incentives to ignore that exploration in the other aspects of their lives (hooks, 1994). Whitehead and colleagues (2022) liken this to an escalator or a moving sidewalk; white people are on a moving path and simply turning around will not stop their movement, they must instead actively move the other way and at a greater rate than the forces acting upon them in order to counteract the system of whiteness. Even still, they will continue to receive the messages which have told them whiteness is the norm, they will be rewarded for continuing not to know, and they will most likely lose their capacity for critical reflection (hooks, 1994).

White caucuses and accountability groups along with highly structured dialogues intended to explore whiteness through sharing, challenging, and supporting can be helpful for active reflection and challenging investments in whiteness (Elliott, 2016). It is important to distinguish these spaces from white-only spaces that seek to reinforce whiteness; caucus spaces are for the purposes of challenging whiteness and interrelated systems of power. They should be undertaken as one dimension of challenging whiteness, deepening broader commitments to justice, and taking action to dismantle systems of oppression (Elliott, 2016).

Men and masculinity.

The discussion of developing critical consciousness in folx with privilege can also be understood outside of and in connection to whiteness by examining men and masculinity. Understanding men and masculinity requires an understanding of gender and patriarchy to explore how to develop critical consciousness in men. Patriarchy not only teaches men that it is appropriate to be masculine, patriarchal systems reward men with power and privilege for engaging in masculine behavior (Kaufman, 2013). Therefore men behaving in masculine ways and being rewarded for doing so is normalized.

Gender is a dynamic social construct that is performed in the context of culture, place, and milieu or moment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender is continuously socially constructed to align with social norms rather than a specific, fixed set of behaviors (Adams & Coltrane, 2005; Colquitt, 2020; Connell, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This suggests that "doing gender" is less about behavior and more about determining what society deems appropriate and acting in compliance with those standards. Masculinity, as an expression of gender, is a performed social identity that is regulated by society's notions of manhood (Kimmel & Messner, 2013). Masculinity can be associated with behaviors and traits, but Connell (1987) cautioned against an essentialist definition of masculinity as a specific way of being or behaving.

Engaging in socially acceptable behavior can prove beneficial. hooks (1994) explained that people are encouraged to ignore, and often rewarded for ignoring, critical reflections on systems of oppression and the privilege those systems impart. Patriarchy, "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (hooks, 1994, p. 239), rewards everyone for ignoring this dominance. It is woven into every aspect of society and affects everyone as it is psychologically ingrained in our beliefs, thoughts, and

actions (Johnson, 2017). As a system of oppression, patriarchy is linked to sexism just as racism is linked to white supremacy. As such, social identities consistently favored by systems of oppression (such as whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and middle/upper socio-economic status) work in concert to perpetuate privilege and power (Connell, 1987; Johnson, 2017).

Power, privilege, and masculinity.

Discussions on men and masculinity that focus on power, power structures, and/or the ways power structures allot power to some and not to others can be effectively framed through hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony, which lies at the root of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), illustrates the hierarchical ordering of people within society through their behavior, actions, and ways of being (Gramsci, 1971). Power and privilege are allocated based on one's ability to align themselves with the most idealized notions of masculinity based on the ethnographic moment (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005). Those who are best able to discern, engage in behaviors, and/or adopt an identity most idealized by society are best able to ascend social hierarchy and obtain power (Connell, 1987).

Although hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily correlated with a specific set of behaviors or static gender characteristics (Connell, 1987), some traits and aspects of identity are more idealized over others. Being white, Western, middle to upper class, strong, stoic, aggressive, and heterosexual are characteristics and traits consistently privileged by society and, thus, within hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Hearn & Morgan, 1990). The way hierarchy is created, and the actions taken by individuals to obtain power and privilege can fluctuate as these actions (i.e., attire) are based on socially constructed norms which themselves fluctuate (Connell, 2005).

Given that a person's ability to gain access to power and privilege is directly associated with their ability to discern and engage with social norms that best affect their

hierarchical position, the power associated with hegemonic masculinity is relational and is not inherently linked to specific people or actions. Therefore, characteristics and traits, such as masculinity and whiteness, need not be intrinsically privileged. If the privileges and power associated with hegemonic masculinity are relational, then expectations and identities that are currently privileged can change (Connell, 1987).

Undoing gender is the process of disrupting social hierarchies created out of systems of oppression, such as patriarchy (Deutsch, 2007). The process of undoing gender centers on reducing gender differences and subverting power structures and hierarchies created by patriarchy. This process creates opportunities for gender equality but does not dissolve power structures or hierarchy (Colquitt, 2020). Those attempting to undo gender must first move from being actively compliant, if not complicit, with social norms privileged by patriarchal power to challenging the legitimacy of hegemony with intentional action.

NOW THAT YOU "GET IT," WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

As the title of this article asks, building a critical consciousness is a noble pursuit but is not an end in and of itself. Developing an awareness of inequities of the world, of the experiences of folks in different positions across many spectra of identities, lays the foundation for a deeper reevaluation of values, beliefs, and actions. As we explored different perspectives on leadership (Dugan & Henderson, 2021; Heifetz, 1994) and approaches to practicing allyship (Cobham, 2011; Deutch, 2007; Reason et al., 2005) we found both literatures calling for this knowledge to be a catalyst for action.

While developing a critical consciousness reflects an expansion of one's own base of knowledge, it is in taking action that this consciousness becomes a practice of leadership. Participating in these spaces can cultivate a commitment to making homes and schools as well as personal and professional relationships, more just. In taking these actions, privileged folx can use self-reflection and learning to shift the dynamics of their groups and social

spaces to address structural challenges facing our world (Heifetz, 1994). They will be changed and will create change (Dugan, 2017). These actions will also prompt further self-reflection thereby enhancing capacity for action and leadership (Museus et al., 2017; Reason et al., 2005). The quality of leadership can be evaluated by the change made and experienced rather than whether it boosts one person's social status. It realigns a person's values, challenges their goals and commitments, and ultimately can cultivate an ongoing commitment to justice in all aspects of their lives, which is key to continual progress through the SALT model (Museus et al., 2017).

A commitment to justice further demonstrates an internal motivation to keep learning and evaluate actions in the direction of a more just world (Museus et al., 2017). This, in turn, leads to a capacity to act, not in singular instances but in a sustained approach to engaging in social activities and organizations. We remain deeply convinced that those receiving privilege are a necessary part of creating deeper kinds of cultural change on college campuses (Cobham, 2011), a key intended outcome for all college students (Leigh et al., 2021; Manzano et al., 2017). It is clear there is still much work to do, and that each of us has a role to play in our own work as well as the work of those around us.

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CONOR P. MCLAUGHIN *is a Staff Learning and Development Specialist in the Center for*

Inclusive Excellence at San Diego State University. Their areas of research focus on

leadership, people with dominant group identities, and practicing leadership in student

affairs.

KEENAN COLQUITT JR. *is the Program Lead for Diversity Scholar engagement at*

University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity. His research interests

include gender identity development, masculinity, and gender socialization in college men