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ABSTRACT

Since leadership studies tend to deal with powerful public personalities, and since leadership in the U.S. is biased in terms of race, class, and sex privileges, it is not surprising that the contributions of black women leaders go largely unrecognized and that studies on black female leadership are scant and present an incomplete picture. To correct this, more ethnographic studies of communities, church groups, and families are called for, in order to determine how leadership emerges, is exerted, and is taught. Whether it can be taught, indirectly by religious and educational institutions, or directly by special courses, is still being debated. As far as black women are concerned, educational and religious institutions have done little to foster leadership training. It has been the social and church clubs and informal community networks that have been the training grounds for black women leaders. There are obstacles to such leadership training, however: (1) declining participation in the clubs; (2) the negative myth of the black matriarchy; (3) the socialization of black girls away from male-dominated areas such as politics; and (4) the neglect of black women community leaders by public institutions and the media. And finally, although it is debatable whether college extra-curricular activities have played a serious role in the promotion of black women's leadership except for the nurturance provided by women students' clubs and sororities, it seems that the extra-curriculum has become even less responsive to women's leadership potential over the past decade. (CMG)

## Preface

The foundation for this paper comes from three sets of experiences, the most important of which has been my role as a leader in local and national organizations (e.g., a university-based Black faculty and staff association and The National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors). Second in importance has been my research on Black women's education supported by a Women's Educational Equity Act Grant and a study on minority women's leadership development supported by The Funds for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Third is my work as a formal and informal advisor to women students organizations (e.g., Intercollegiate Association for Women Students, campus sororities, adhoc committees or caucuses on Black women's concerns). Since the knowledge base on Black women's leadership is virtually non-existent, I have found these experiences and dialogue with colleagues to be most informative. I am especially grateful to Carol J. Carter, Marsha Darling, and Elizabeth Pleck for their comments on this paper and related work.

## Introduction

When I began the research for this paper, I started with three assumptions:

(1) that leadership is an important issue about which there is a growing concern in this country,

(2) that the leadership potential among Black women (especially the women of the next generation) is not being realized, and

(3) that the college experience, especially the extra-curriculum, has played and should play a role in fostering leadership among Black women.

During the course of my research I have found support for the first two assumptions. My perusal of popular and academic journals reveals that leadership is a topic of great concern. For example, Black Enterprise, MS., Time, Daedalus, and Change have devoted special issues to "the leadership crisis" in America. In fact, some political analysts argue that the defeat of Jimmy Carter by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential elections was a reflection of public demand for "strong leadership."

Among Blacks, there is an equivalent demand for strong leadership. The results of a 1980 survey of the readers of Black Enterprise reveal that Black Americans feel the need for a strong charismatic leader and perceive the current Black leadership to

be ineffective and powerless.

My review of the literature also reveals that Black women's leadership potential is not being realized and that the contributions of contemporary Black women leaders are largely unrecognized. For instance, most studies of Black social and political institutions such as the church and political parties document the exclusion of women from positions of authority. Furthermore, those few Black women who assume positions of leadership receive the public recognition typically accorded Black men who assume similar roles. For example, when the readers of Black Enterprise were asked "Who do you think speaks for the aspirations of Black America?," 16 Black leaders and five organizations were listed. Of those 16 Black leaders, the names of only three Black women surfaced — Barbara Jordan, Coretta Scott King, and Patricia Roberts Harris — and none of these three were among the top five vote-getters. Though admittedly the readers of Black Enterprise are predominantly Black, middle-class and male, I believe that the perception of Black leadership as male domain mirrors the attitudes of the larger population. And, if we are to address this apparent need for Black leadership, we must utilize the potential for leadership among Black women and encourage public recognition of those women who assume leadership positions.

My third assumption, that the college experience has played and should play a role in fostering leadership among Black women, has proven problematic for me. In fact, it was in my attempt to "think through," and prove or disprove this idea that

I was forced to ask myself four questions which served to organize this paper. Those questions are:

(1) What is leadership and how is it acquired or taught?

(2) Which institutions foster Black women's leadership and how?

(3) What are the obstacles to Black women's leadership development and which are systemic or learned by Black women?

(4) What role has or should the college experience play in fostering leadership among Black women?

Conceptualizing Leadership: Problems and Issues

With regards to the first question — "What is leadership and how is it acquired or taught?" — my review produced major gaps, inconsistencies, and biases in the literature. Examination of classic works on leadership indicate widespread disagreement among scholars and practitioners on the definition of leadership. In fact, James McGregor Burns, author of the prize-winning book, Leadership argues that leadership is "...one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (p. 2)."

In addition to definitional problems, the task of understanding leadership is further complicated by several tendencies among scholars, among which are:

(1) a tradition of studying the lives of political elites, such as heads of nation-states or leaders of revolutionary movements, and presenting the data as case materials on leadership.

The lives of Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandi are favorites for this purpose.

(2) a practice of studying leadership within the narrow confines of a single discipline with little or no attention being devoted to inherent biases in the field. For example, within political science and history, only those personalities emerging as powerful influences within public institutions are regarded as leaders. Consequently, those individuals who have no visible impact upon institutions are excluded from studies of leadership, and

(3) a tendency to equate leadership with successful manipulation, exertion of brute power, propoganda, and fame.

Unfortunately those individuals to whom the label "leader" is attached are occasionally no more than experts in power-wielding, and enticing media attention. In short, on occasion the banner of leadership has been worn by the amoral, selfish, and misguided.

One scholar argues that "...traditional conceptions of leadership tend to be so dominated by images of presidents and prime ministers speaking to the masses from on high that we (forget) the vast preponderance of personal influence exerted quietly and subtly in everyday relationships (Burns, 1978, p. 442)." As one might imagine, it is the interactive processes and

personal influence exerted in private or informal institutions (such as families and community networks) about which we know little. Furthermore, since leadership like power in our society is biased in terms of class, race, and sex priviledge, the notion of leadership among women, ethnic minorities, and the poor is unthinkable in traditional terms.

Not surprisingly, leadership studies which include women or Blacks as subjects are scant. Extremely sparse are studies devoted specifically to leadership among Black women. In fact, Blender (1978) argues that the data are so scarce and the research biases so strong that our current knowledge base is probably inapplicable for studying non-elite leaders.

Encouraging is that research on Black and female political leaders has increased substantially over the past decade. For example, Irene Diamond's work on women in state governments, Pauline Stone's work on Black and women delegates to previous national democratic conventions, and the proliferation of biographical and autobiographical works on political leaders such as Golda Meir, Barbara Jordan, and Martin Luther King Jr. are representative of the burgeoning interest in Black and famale political elites. Despite the emergence of these works, large gaps in the field remain. Leadership dynamics in small non-public institutions or groups is still largely unexplored, and unfortunately, this void in the literature has been filled by unsubstantiated notions. For example, the notion that women and Black leaders have difficulty in exerting authority, in gaining loyalty, and delegating responsibility appears fairly frequently

in the literature; yet, the data supporting these notions are inconclusive.

Interestingly, there are now a few studies which indicate that women leaders might have better relationships with their followers than their male counterparts. A case in point is Project Athena — a study of women at Westpoint — which revealed that there are no differences between how male and female leaders describe their own behaviors; that women leaders are perceived by their followers to have more concern for the welfare of the troops; and that women leaders are perceived by their followers to be as capable as their male counterparts of getting a task or mission accomplished. Unfortunately, the published findings of Project Athena make no mention of whether or not Black women were in the sample.

What we know about Black women leaders is based on small scale studies and biographical or autobiographical works on political elites and professionals, and these works present an incoherent picture. Cynthia Epstein's 1973 study of successful Black women professionals advances the notion that the double negatives of race and sex combine to create a unique status, thereby eliminating some of the external and internal barriers (related to race and sex biases) commonly encountered by Black and women entering high status professions. The 31 women in Epstein's study also exhibited more self-confidence, less fear of failure, and less conflict about work and family than their white counterparts.

On the other hand, the first person accounts of Black

women executives in a recent issue of Black Enterprise reveal ambivalence about power, conflict over work and family demands, and difficulty in working relationships with subordinates. Whereas the autobiographical writings of political and intellectual leaders such as Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Pauli Murray, and Angela Davis present a mixed picture of women who emerged from supportive families into male spheres where they encountered hostility from several camps as they grew to national prominence.

I suspect the idea that Black women confronted sexism in the 1960's was rarely entertained by many people until Shirley Chisholm asserted "I have suffered more discrimination as a result of my gender than as a result of race." When Chisholm raised this issue in a public forum, she jolted the consciousness of many and opened up a range of related questions about Black women's life-options which are yet to be explored.

However, the picture we have of Black women's leadership is incomplete. Like the traditional literature on leadership, the new research is biased in terms of status. Studies of Black women community leaders are just emerging. A case in point is the work of Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, who describes the evolution of women who became community leaders as they "transformed private troubles into public issues." Gilkes also attempts to demonstrate that these women community leaders are part of a longstanding tradition -- the Black women's club movement.

To complete the picture of Black women leaders, we need more ethnographical studies of communities, church groups, and

families. Joyce Ladner's study of urban community and family life through the eyes of Black women; Carol Stack's and Joyce Aschenbrenner's work on Black family kinship systems; and family histories like Pauli Murray's Proud Shoes and Margaret Walkers's Jubilee help to fill the gap in our knowledge of women's leadership and influence within informal, non-public institutions. In general, these works demonstrate that Black women play central roles in the preparation of Black girls for adult roles, including leadership roles. It is in families, churches, clubs, beauty parlors, and informal groups (such as a Tuesday morning laundry network) that leadership emerges, gets exerted, and taught.

Socialization into Leadership: Where are the Teachers and Schools?

How leadership gets taught is an issue much debated. Some scholars argue that our society is weakened by the lack of a practical or intellectual school for leadership. Yet, others contend that the preparation and maturation of leaders is one of the major goals of our educational and religious institutions. Indeed, some prestigious institutions of higher learning and religious groups annually report the number of alumnae who have risen to public, socially sanctioned positions of authority.

Despite the fact that some universities and religious groups have produced a significant number of college presidents and political leaders, the question of whether or not these individuals would have become leaders without the benefit of these institutions is one which can not be answered for certain.

One could make the argument that these individuals were "born" leaders and would have risen to the challenge regardless. In fact, early theorists of leadership argued just this point, that is, that "the great men" who emerged as cultural, political, and religious leaders, did so because that was their destiny. Obviously this line of argument leaves no room or need for leadership training.. Nevertheless, academics continually assert that higher education (particularly the liberal arts curriculum) is a passport to leadership. Whereas, industry spends millions annually on leadership training and scores of "How to Be a Leader" manuals are published each year.

Given that so much, in terms of financial and human resources, is being invested in leadership training, one would expect that comparable investments would be made in evalustion of method effectiveness. Regrettably, this has not been and is not now the case. Of this situation Stogdill concludes:

> "...research on leadership training is generally inadequate in both design and execution. It has failed to address itself to the most crucial problems of leadership — consequences of training for acquisition and retention of the role, maintenance of leadership under concerted challenge of legitimacy of the role, and effects of leadership on group performance and member satisfaction. Training that ignores these issues can hardly be called training in leadership." (Stogdill, p. 159).

In short, the data are inconclusive on the issue of leadership training effectiveness. At best they illustrate three things:

(1) that the functions of leadership can be taught,

(2) that leadership style can be modified at least for a short time, and

(3) that individuals who emerge as leaders in one situation, tend to emerge as leaders in new groups.

As for the role of educational institutions in leadership training, the data are again inconclusive. Leadership in elementary school, high school, and college appears to be predictive of later leadership in adult business and social activities. Yet, the data do not conform to a clear cause and effect relationship. At best we know that leadership is observable in the formative years and generally persists over the life-course. Also a relationship appears to exist between extra-curricular activities in college and leadership in adult life. To be specific, several studies report that leadership in extra-curricular activities is more highly related to adult success than are scholarship or academic achievement (Courtenay, 1938; Williams & Harrell, 1964; Stogdill. 1974).

Fostering Black Women's Leadership: The Role of Clubs and Informal Networks

For Black women, the issue of how leadership is acquired or taught is just being raised and the question of how effective this training has been is yet to be explored in a meaningful way. In general, it appears that political and educational

institutions have done little to foster Black women's leadership. Indeed, some of the most powerful and stable institutions in the Black community (such as the church) have excluded women's participation at the decision-making level.

Black colleges and universities in large part resemble white institutions in the sexual composition of their administrations, faculty, and the design of their curricula, though I should add that Black women have faired better than their white counterparts in terms of their number on faculties and administrative staffs. However, it has been the social or church club and informal networks within the community which have been the training ground for Black women leaders.

Since the 1890's when Ms. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin made the first call for a national conference of colored women, many groups have emerged and become institutions. Take for example, the National Council of Negro Women (one present-day descendent of the 1920's club movement), the national sororities which number over 100,000 members each, and the Black women's support networks and social improvement groups which are found in every church and community.

Just how effective these organizations are is hard to tell, largely because they have never been scrutinized for their leadership training functions. However, I have a hunch that there is a positive correlation between early active involvement in Black women's clubs and informal networks and the assumption of leadership roles in adult life. In other words, I believe that these organizations serve to socialize Black girls for

leadership. For instance, it is important to note that the majority of Black women political leaders hold membership in a national sorority, have had involvement with the National Council of Negro Women at in some point and have held some office at the local level in a women's club during young adulthood.

Precisely how this socialization process takes place has not been documented, yet as a member of a sorority, several clubs, and informal networks, I think there are several factors which enter into this process. First, these groups provide comfortable, protective settings in which "to try on new leadership responsibilities." Second, these groups often offer a variety of women as role models who can serve as inspiration for those inexperienced at leading. Third, since most of these groups offer a mixture of ages and expertise, many women find mentors and learn the basic skills of management from seasoned professionals. Lastly, as I reflect upon my first club experience in high school, it is also clear that I learned some crucial principles which have remained with me ever since. These principles have to do with believing in one's self, making commitments to Black institutions, setting priorities for myself, and accepting responsibility for the decisions I make. Indeed, the first lessons learned in organizing, dealing with conflict, and building a network, come from my experience at age 16 in a social service club for Black girls.

Obstacles to Black Women's Leadership Development:

The Role of Public Institutions

I could go on endlessly praising of Black women's clubs

but I do not want to convey that there is no problem with leadership training among Black women is problem-free. The problem is a function of several obstacles among which are:

(1) the declining participation of Black women and girls in social and church clubs related to lack of opportunity for some, the impact of a dominant youth culture for others, and changing family patterns in Black communities.

(2) the enduring myth and negative projection of the Black matriarchy which serves to discourage the assumption and promotion of leadership responsibilities among those with potential.

(3) the continuing socialization of Black girls away from male-dominated arenas such as elective politics by public institutions, and

(4) the persisting neglect of Black women community leaders by public institutions and the media, which sanction and legitimize other leaders.

Black Women's Leadership Training and the College Extra-Curriculum

When I first began this paper, I believed that the college experience, particularly the extra-curriculum, had and should play a role in promotion of Black women's leadership development. Though I have barely scratched the surface on this issue, my cursory examination of the literature suggests three things. First, it is questionable whether or not the college

extra-curriculum has played a serious role in the promotion of Black women's leadership, excepting for the nurturance provided by women students' club, and sororities. Second, it seems to me that the extra-curriculum on the Black college campus has historically been more responsive to women's potential in this area. Third, it appears that the extra-curriculum on both the historically Black and predominantly white campuses has become less responsive to women's leadership potential over the past decade.

In order to test these notions crudely, I took a look at the catalogues of 12 Black colleges for the years 1930-38, and found an array of extra-curricular activities targeted towards Black coeds. Not surprising the lists of the two Black women's college were long and varied. The listing of activities by the historically Black coed institutions was also extensive. Most institutions offered Black coeds the option of membership in the YWCA, debating societies, Sunday School Clubs, Southern Negro Youth Council, sororities, Women's Glee Clubs, Departmental Clubs, and Literary Societies. Interestingly, my quick glance at 1970 catalogues for these same institutions leads me to believe that the options are now fewer.

The extra-curriculum of the predominantly, white coed campus usually offers Black women one option for leadership development — that option is the sorority. Though most coed campuses have a Black students organization, a Black theatre group, a Black dance group, and a Black choir, those who emerge as leaders of these groups are usually male. For example, during

the first 10 years of the Black students' organization of the predominantly white campus from which I graduated, Black women were named as leaders for the Black students organization only twice, of the Black theatre troupe once, for the Black dance group once, and never for the Black choir.

The situation with wider campus groups is worse. Many of the large state-supported and prestigious campuses have had Black office-holders in student government. A few have even had Black presidents. However, those Blacks who have held office in campus-wide groups have been overwhelming male. And I see no significant change for the future.

Indeed, what I see for the future is that Black women will continue to represent a large pool of untapped talent, that the number of would-be leaders has and will probably increase, and that those institutions and social groups which foster Black women's leadership will continue to go unrecognized and be in need of our support. It is likely that the mechanisms through which society sanctions "appropriate" leaders will continue to exclude those who lead informal networks and non-elite groups.

## Conclusion

This situation is a critical one, which must be addressed by scholars and activists. If we are to save this earth from destruction, we must get more women and Blacks in leadership roles at the negotiating tables. Sara Alyce Wright, Executive Director of the YWCA reflected upon her socialization into leadership noting: "A leader is someone who doesn't throw you in the water and tell you to sink or swim, but who has her hands

underneath you in the water if you need it." We need more leaders of this type and I am certain that many uncut diamonds are to be found among the next generation of Black women.

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