Race and Leadership:
Implications for Leaders of Color and Leadership Development Programs Addressing Issues of Diversity

The following is a brief summary of "A critical review of race and ethnicity in the leadership literature: Surfacing context, power and the collective dimensions of leadership" by Sonia M. Ospina and Erica G. Foldy in *The Leadership Quarterly* 20: 876–896, 2009. The main points are highlighted, followed by key practical considerations both for leaders of color and those interested in supporting the advancement of leaders of color.

The scope of the study is the intersection of race and leadership in the literature. The review is guided by these questions: How had the leadership literature treated race? And, given key theoretical developments in the field, what particularly fertile areas in the relationship between race and leadership should be explored in future research?

Context Matters

The review highlights that context matters for addressing the leadership demands of changing organizations, including the demands for diversity. The practical implication is that leadership development programs for people of color, as for any group, need to cater to the particular context in which the program is implemented. Increasingly fragmented environments and more loosely structured organizations need to find common purpose, while on the other hand, increasingly diverse workforces and clients demands the valuing of difference. The trick for organizations is to figure out how to find unity while not suppressing, and better yet valuing, difference. A one-size-fits-all approach is not helpful when grappling with this paradox; honoring both unity and diversity will have very different implications depending on the organizational context.

This paradox of unity and diversity suggests that organizations need to balance some degree of color blindness (or to find means other than racial identity to foster unity) with some degree of color consciousness. A helpful organizational practice is to start by assessing where an organization is on that spectrum and where it needs to be, given its context.

The Invisibility of the Leadership of People of Color

A solid record documents the systematic exploration of the role of race on leadership in the field. Yet most leadership theory implicitly or explicitly claims to be identity-neutral, disregarding insights from studies that explicitly take a perspective on race.

Some scholars have suggested that studies of non-white groups are less likely to permeate the knowledge base of what is traditionally viewed as the leadership studies field. The field tends to take for granted those in positions of formal authority (usually white people, often men) as the standard referent. So, leadership research about people of color is seen not viewed for its potential to produce generalizations because the cases it documents are considered idiosyncratic.

This is problematic for two reasons. First, given the ubiquity of race-ethnicity in today's society, the invisibility of a large body of work represents a significant loss for the field, and for the practice of leadership. Second, the invisibility of the experience of leaders of color in the leadership literature inadvertently contributes to the perpetuation of social inequality by obscuring the experiences of people of color in the social system.

Three Ways to Think about Race and Leadership

The review discusses the leadership literature's treatment of race by addressing three questions that the authors found characteristic of existing research.

1. How does race affect perceptions of leadership?

Studies of predominantly white work environments document the constraints that leaders of color face based on how they are perceived by others. This work starts from the assumption that leaders of color are disadvantaged because, for various reasons, they are not perceived as legitimate. This work suggests that when people of color are given access to leadership positions, they may still face constraints from their colleagues and subordinates due to power inequities that privilege whiteness.

One practical implication is that, while important, affirmative action policies alone are not enough to advance leaders of color to positions of power. More inclusive environments are needed where diversity is valued and people are prepared to learn from different perspectives.

2. How does race affect the ways leadership is enacted?

Ospina and Foldy find that another subset of the literature looks at how the race of the leader affects the ways that he/she enacts that leadership. Some of the more recent work explores how leaders of color deliberately and consciously draw on their racial identity to perform leadership. Studies that have investigated the leadership style of particular racial groups show how these leaders often turn mechanisms of oppression into successful means for productive change, and race into a leadership resource. Another theme is that non-white leaders must be bi-culturally fluent – leading in ways that resonate with their own racial group or sense of self while also connecting with the dominant ways of working in a white-dominated environment.

Leaders of color again face a conundrum: their racial identity might be a constraint, in as much as others superficially impose judgments, but this identity can also be usurped into a savvy, multicultural ability to lead across difference. It may be helpful for leadership development programs to incorporate a reflective practice component that invites participants to explore when and how their race constrains or enables their leadership. This work relates to the cultural competence literature discussed below.

3. How do leaders grapple with the social reality of race?

Ospina and Foldy find that a third type of literature seeks to understand how leaders and/or followers grapple with the reality of race as something that affects the work environment. Studies in this category treat race as a social reality that colors and constructs perceptions, interactions and relationships. Scholars here emphasize the role of collective identity as a mechanism that may help to induce followers to transcend their personal interests and perform beyond expectations.

This discussion suggests that leadership development programs can help hone leaders' reflective capacity. A self-assessment component can help leaders reflect on whether and how they might use strategies that draw on and foster collective identity in their work.

Another subset within this category of literature draws on Critical Race Theory and starts with the premise that race not only shapes individuals' psychological makeup but is also intrinsically part of their collective identities and of the larger social structures within which leadership emerges. Social structures shape individuals' experience of race and influence its meanings; at the same time, individuals shape how race is construed and embedded in social structure. This work places micro and macro power dynamics and systemic inequities at the forefront. It also reinforces agency – leaders are able to recognize their constraints while finding openings to transcend these constraints and even shape their environment.

The authors also discuss work that introduces the notion of 'intersectionality' which locates race within a broad spectrum of multiple and overlapping identities like gender, sexual orientation, etc. For example, a Black woman might have a very different leadership experience than that of a Latino man depending on the multiple identities at play in a given context. This suggests that it is problematic to think that an entire group of people will practice a certain approach to leadership given their race or that race will always trump other identities in leadership.

Leadership development programs could benefit from a critical race lens that incorporates an analysis of power relations and the intersection of race with other salient markers of identity, but must be careful not to belabor the constraining factors of race, and in fact, consider the possibility that this it can also be used as a source of leadership.

An Integrated Framework for Thinking about Leadership and Race

Ospina and Foldy's categories for organizing the literature offer an integrated framework for thinking about leadership and race. In the first category race is seen as a constraint because of the marginalization and disempowerment of people of color. In the second, these dynamics are recognized, but the literature documents how leaders of color transcend such constraints and transform them into a resource through their own agency. In the third category, the emphasis moves from the individual to collective dimensions of leadership. Here social identity is both a constraint and resource used by the leader or the group. There is a more explicit analysis of power dynamics in understanding how race and leadership connect. There is also more explicit recognition that humans and structures co-influence each other, and that it is not a simple unidirectional dynamic.

What this suggests for leaders of color and designers of leadership development programs is that both race and leadership are far from being static phenomena. Race influences enactments and perceptions of leadership in as much as leadership also influences how race is understood. It is important that leadership development programs help leaders see the complexity of the issue and think about race in a variety of ways.

Insights for Research

Generally, and despite these interesting and nuanced developments in the field of leadership, the review suggests that scholarly work on race and leadership remains separate from the mainstream leadership tradition, which renders western perspectives and 'whiteness' the default categories to measure leadership. The review also notes that both constructs of race and leadership,

have become more fluid within the fields where they are studied. Yet the leadership field has not taken advantage of new advances in both fields, whether separately or at the nexus, that can better illuminate the relationship between race and leadership. There is room for a new kind of research that can yield important insights for theory and practice.

Pairing the insights of this review with those from a review on the diversity literature presently underway, one conclusion becomes striking. While the leadership literature does not adequately explore or acknowledge race, the diversity literature in turn falls short of exploring leadership explicitly (one of the articles reviewed argues that this shortfall is in part due to current models of leadership premised on implicit theories that sanction and perpetuate inequality). This represents another opportunity for research.

If we are to construct a leadership narrative that is inclusive of diverse perspectives, then further research exploring the race-leadership intersection must capture the leadership experiences of more diverse groups. Part of the agenda for advancing leaders of color is actually documenting their voice and experience. Ospina and Foldy also argue for more research on 'whiteness' as a social identity with equally charged social meanings, and for incorporating in research the notion of 'intersectionality' to see how the multiple layers of one's identity overlap to render leadership in particular ways.

Sonia M. Ospina, PhD, is the Faculty Director of the Research Center for Leadership in Action and an Associate Professor of Public Management and Policy at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

Erica Gabrielle Foldy, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Public and Nonprofit Management at the NYU Wagner and affiliated faculty member of the Research Center for Leadership in Action.

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