

## **A Re-articulation of Black Female Community Leadership: Processes, Networks and a Culture of Resistance**

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Leadership as a social phenomenon has too often been defined in white male terms or associated with elitist positions and operationalized in the “public sphere” (Smith 1987; Astin and Leland 1991). Critiques of traditional theories attempt to move away from equating female leadership spheres of activity based on a public/private dichotomy. Yet, according to Van Nostrand (1993:xvi), the concept of leadership continues to operate on a “continuum of domination and subordination” Consequently, leadership theories are rarely generalizable to women and minorities. Black women, especially, have been virtually ignored as a topic of sociological inquiry. Nowhere is this exclusion more prevalent than in the case of the contribution of black women to the black community. Black women have traditionally formed networks that provide the structure for the emergence of their community leadership. Yet, these community structures are often ignored by social scientists in general and community leadership/development specialists in particular (Davis 1981; hooks 1984; Gilkes 1988; Horton 1992). The result has been an unfortunate lack of understanding of the importance and role of female networks for community leadership.

This paper challenges approaches to the study of leadership that reflect and reify particular assumptions embedded in classical Eurocentric notions and meaning of leadership. Within this context, leadership is re-articulated and a definition of black female leadership is offered that considers the structure, culture, and processes of everyday life.

### **A Re-articulation of Leadership as a Social Concept**

African-American women have traditionally been relegated to subordinate positions in society that have affected the manner in which their leadership emerged (Collins 1990; Gilkes 1983, 1988). Lack of access to traditional sources of power and decision-making forced black women to find alternative means of leadership in non-traditional arenas and ways (Giles 1985). Hence, black female leadership in the United States is a history of their struggle for liberation from oppression. It is a history of collective struggle to maintain cultural traditions in the black community through the church (Woodson 1921; Gilkes 1985; Dodson 1988; Blackwell 1991; Billingsley 1992), educational endeavors (Smythe 1976; Salem 1990; Franklin and Moss 1994), economic enterprise, (Brown 1988; Blackwell 1991; Butler 1991; Horton 1992) and the family (McAdoo 1980; Billingsley 1992).

For the most part, black women have played a major role in political resistance, a role that transcended both the public and private spheres of everyday life (Giddings 1984; Jones 1985). Black women found it necessary to take on leadership roles over and beyond those of their white counterparts in the broader society. The emasculation of the black male, combined with the ignominy placed on the black woman, have formed and structured gender roles in the black community (Hine 1994). As slaves, domestic and industrial laborers, black women received no respect from whites beyond that of producer and reproducer (Jones 1985). It was difficult to separate “work from family based obligations; productive labor had no meaning outside the family and community context” (Jones 1985:64). Race, class, and gender, an “interlocking web

of oppression” (Smith 1982:xxviii), forced black women to create safe havens from the hostile environment that prohibited personal growth and community survival.

As a result, black women developed a “culture of resistance” against the endless tides of despair (Gilkes 1988; Collins 1990). Political resistance required that black women expand their roles of homemakers and laborers to incorporate that of “caretakers” of the race (hooks 1990). Black female leadership was therefore cultivated and operationalized in homeplace (hooks 1990) and workspaces (Jones 1985); in churchhouses (Gilkes 1985) and in schoolhouses (Hines 1990). In essence, black female leadership emerges from and is shaped by both the external and internal forces (Horton 1992) that affected their everyday experiences.

### **Defining Black Female Leadership**

While the meaning of black leadership is far from universal, three areas of female leadership are evident in the black literature: 1) Black female leadership exemplifies survival techniques in family, church and community organizations that encompass the creativity and commitment for group well-being (Gilkes 1985, 1988, Hine 1990; Hooks 1990; Salem 1990; Morris 1984; Collins 1990; Horton 1992; Allen 1995); 2) black female networks are dynamic and interrelated entities that form a matrix of reinforcements that hold the black community together while developing leadership for a better future (Gilkes 1983; 1985; Collins 1990); and 3) black female leadership represents the collective experience and action toward community empowerment (Collins 1990; Gilkes 1985, 1988, Dodson and Gilkes 1987; Childs 1989).

Employing the experiences of black women in the re-articulation of leadership as a sociological concept erases the ideological premises that hinder an explanation of the experiences of diverse groups in particular settings. In contrast to the traditional interpretation of the individual as a leader, black women formulate ideas and models that express the reality of their own experiences while opposing the ideology of domination. Consequently, The “term *leader* is not one that black women accept readily” (Gilkes 1983:132). One reason for this reluctance is that the term continues to be associated with elitist ideas of domination and control (Gilkes 1983; Childs 1989).

According to Gilkes (1988:54):

Working for ‘the Race’ emerged as a central historical role and a highly esteemed social status. Formerly called ‘Race men’ and ‘Race women,’ the men and women who do such work are often called community workers now. That term arising during the late 1960s and early 1970s, focused emphasis on community control, group solidarity, and cultural pride.

Gilkes (1983) found in her study of professional female community workers that the label “leader” implied belonging to an exclusive club. One woman in Gilkes’ (1983:132) study defined the term leader as “the ego piece” and a trap that led to co-optation. This response may be a reaction to an individualistic approach and perhaps explains why it is often shunned by black female community workers (Gilkes 1983, 1988). To avoid misinterpretation, the lay and professional black community tends to refer to black women’s activities in cultural terms: lamplighters, othermothers, surrogates, and centered women, among a few (Gilkes 1983; Sacks 1988; Collins 1990, 1991).

Community othermothers, provide linkage between family and community roles. According to Collins (1991), “othermothers” are women who provide support to biological mothers and serve as contributors to the black community. Dodson (1988), in her analysis of black women's role in the black church, employ the term “surrogate” to define black female leadership. Female church

auxiliaries are off-shoots of extended family and provide mutual aid support for the betterment of community (Dodson 1988; Gilkes 1985). Black female networks are crucial to the transmission of tradition from generation to generation. They support self-definition and self-valuation which is important for the development of potential leadership (Collins 1990). Jewell (1993:86-89) in *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond* addresses female informal networks in the black community as basically serving three functions: (1) exchanging invaluable goods and services, including advice and information necessary for the development of positive self-concepts; (2) contributing greatly to the fortitude and resilience of African American women throughout their existence in the United States; and (3) facilitating the cooperation, stability and edification of African American women and the African American [extended] family. On the other hand, Sacks (1988: 78) distinguishes between black men and black women “public spokespersons” and suggests the term “centerwomen” when referring to network centers and the leadership roles of black women.

Despite this growing awareness of the importance of black female networks in the black community, scholars have yet to provide a definition of black female leadership. Hence, this paper offers a working definition of *black female community leadership* as:

the struggle for group survival whereby group *collective experience*, and group socio-emotional supports, as well as the instrumental aspects of developing and maintaining internal female networks for institution building, merge to form *collective action* for cultural maintenance and black *community empowerment* (Allen 1995:47).

This definition is supported by the social and historical experience of black women in America (Hine 1994). Thus, the task at hand is to use that experience to identify the processes, content, and form of black female leadership in contemporary America for future research and toward rebuilding the black community (Giddings 1984; Childs 1989; Jewell 1994; Collins 1990; Horton 1992; Allen 1995). Black community survival means caretaking of the race; it depends on black female leadership that is directly linked to daily issues such as health, housing, education, child care, jobs, safety, pain and suffering (Lerner 1972; Hooks 1990). Scott (1991:10) contends that these daily routines are ways of “keeping good times going” and for black female leadership, dealing with the multiplicity of oppression become “the habit of surviving.”

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary leadership models are based on traditional assumptions that ignore the processes that give meaning the concept itself. In essence, the *ways of knowing* have been restricted to *a priori* assumptions. This paper offers a re-articulation of leadership as an alternative to traditional views. The above analysis demonstrates how differences in interpretation of a vague concept such as leadership can be attributed to the assumptions that underlie an ethnocentric paradigm. What is missing from traditional models of leadership is the understanding of the processes prior to “the doing” of leadership or “the outcomes” of leadership. By focusing on the historical and cultural aspects, we can better understand the social and political realities of everyday life. The collective experiences of black women come alive and female networks are seen as viable structures from which leadership emerges. Hence, the scope of leadership is not only broadened, but the analysis moves to new arenas. At the same time, the basis for re-articulating the concept of leadership is advanced.

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