Considering Gender and Student Leadership Through the Lens of Intersectionality

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This chapter explores the concept of intersectionality and its applicability to student leadership development as well as recommendations on how intersectionality can provide transformative learning for students of all gender identities.

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Student leaders are an integral part of educational communities as they help shape the culture of higher education institutions (Magolda, 2005) and middle or high school settings (Murphy, 2011). Whether college students participate in student government, residential advising, honors programs, fraternities and sororities, or athletic teams, being engaged can help students develop identities as leaders and social change agents. Leadership can be and has been defined in myriad ways; however, for the purpose of this chapter, we draw upon Komives, Lucas, and McMahon’s (2013) definition of leadership as “a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (p. 52).

Like Komives, Longerbeam, Mainella, Osteen, Owen, and Wagner (2009), we contend that leadership is an identity that can be personal or prescribed and is developed as students critically reflect on leadership. So on one hand, students might self-identify as leaders (personal) because they are involved in various activities, even without holding a formal role. On the other hand, students might be named leaders by others (prescribed) because of their involvement, roles, or academic excellence. In either case, when students understand themselves as leaders, they internalize being a leader as a part of their identity (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). This is an example of a personal identity, defined by DeRue et al. as “a set of labels that individuals come to internalize as descriptive of the self” (p. 218). Given this internalization of being a leader as a personal identity, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which students’ social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, age, and ability) influence and interact with
their leader identities (Komives et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005); thus, the present volume focusing on student leadership and gender is an important contribution to advancing knowledge about students’ leadership identity development.

Emerging during the 20th century, scholarship on leadership and gender has received a considerable amount of attention, given the proliferation of laws, policies, and practices supporting the advancement and equal treatment of women (Kent & Moss, 1994). Although leadership and gender scholarship is and continues to be useful, within this chapter we call for gender and leadership scholarship that recognizes intersecting identities of student leaders and the social positioning that comes with those intersecting identities to advance what we know about social identities and leadership. For example, scholars have sought to understand the ways in which women’s leadership styles might look different than those of men (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Others have focused on cultural differences, exploring leadership within specific cultural groups and the ways in which leadership looks very different than White, Western-dominant leadership attributes (Bordas, 2007). Still, the aforementioned analyses explore one segment of one’s identity and leadership (i.e., examines gender or culture) rather than using an intersectional or a full view of one’s identity and the ways one’s holistic identity shapes one’s leadership practices.

Intersectional and critical gender analyses provide useful frameworks through which student leaders can reflect on their identities as leaders, and more holistically, as they continuously develop as adults. Further, critical gender analyses and leadership analyses using intersectional frameworks are important for educators and practitioners as they seek to assist students in their academic, professional, and personal development as they matriculate through formal educational systems.

Within this chapter, we introduce and use the framework of intersectionality as a lens to explore the ways student leadership practices may be affected by intersections of gender, race, and other aspects of identity as well as how students’ social identities shape their leadership identity. We contend educational practitioners, scholars, and students should use intersectionality as a lens to understand, interrogate, reflect, and even problematize how leadership might differ based upon one’s social identity and how leadership might differ for students as they enact their leadership identity within systems and structures of power, privilege, and oppression.

Intersectionality

Although scholars, and more specifically Black women scholars (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde), have discussed multiple and interlocking identities (e.g., race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) and how those identities, together, shape individuals’ lived experiences and social positions in society (Jordan-Zachery, 2007), the term
intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her groundbreaking work, Crenshaw used intersectionality to highlight the unique experiences of Black women who, because of the intersection of their race and gender, are “theoretically erased” (p. 139) because of single-axis antidiscrimination laws and law cases. Crenshaw noted, “in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race and class-privileged women” (p. 139). The aforementioned quote highlights the erasure of gender in race discrimination cases and the erasure of race in sex or gender discrimination cases, also known as identity politics (Crenshaw, 1991), or, theoretically ranking facets of a Black women’s identity (i.e., race or gender) even though Black women cannot dissect their lived experiences in theoretical and single-axis ways. Ultimately, this identity politicking results in the marginalization of Black women in compounded and real ways because of their unique lived experiences and interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., racism and sexism) that work against them.

Crenshaw initially used intersectionality to discuss Black women and women of color, however, because of the usefulness of the framework, it is now used more broadly to discuss social identities in relation to social positioning beyond Black women and women of color (Mitchell, 2014a). For example, intersectionality has been lauded as a framework to advance scholarship and research about social identities and social positions within higher education contexts (Jones, 2014), particularly as single-axis student development theories are often deemed dated or less useful than theoretical frameworks acknowledging multiple, interlocking identities and often do not acknowledge systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Mitchell, 2014a). Given the expansion of intersectionality as a framework, Mitchell (2014b) defined intersectionality as “the intersection of salient socially constructed identities and the extent to which individuals or groups are oppressed or marginalized as a result of interlocking, socially constructed systems of oppression associated with those identities” (para. 2).

Although intersectionality tends to identify those who are marginalized because of interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, it is also a useful framework to promote breaking down systems of oppression and moving further toward social justice as it calls upon “cases where race, gender, sexual identity and class work together” (African American Policy Forum, n.d., p. 2). Because of its global expansion and use in education, the framework also provides educational practitioners and students an analytic tool to reexamine social identities within educational contexts, including power structures within higher education (Mitchell, 2014a; Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Additionally, for the purpose of this chapter, we also use intersectionality to exemplify ways to understand students through their multiple social identities and their leadership practices. As examples, intersectionality can be used to:
• explore themes among Black lesbian high school or college students and
the ways they develop leadership skills within higher education systems
that once excluded them
• challenge all students across the gender spectrum to be more inclusive
in their leadership practices, advocating for social justice as a necessary
component of leadership
• explore the ways racial and gender privilege might hinder leadership de-
velopment for students who are White men
• highlight the ways in which students are often prescribed as leaders sim-
ply because of their social identities within certain educational settings

In the following sections, we seek to advance what is known about stu-
dent leadership and gender using intersectionality as a guiding framework.

Connecting Intersectionality and Student Leadership

As our previous section highlights, intersectionality has a very specific
meaning and purpose as both a theoretical and conceptual tool in un-
derstanding the complex nature of the intersections of race, class, gen-
der, sexuality, and other forms of identity. However, the intent behind the
term has often been misused, oversimplified, or misinterpreted by schol-
ars (Renn, 2010). This has also been true of scholars who have proposed
merging the concepts of intersectionality and leadership. Largely, leadership
scholars have used intersectionality as a framework to discuss and center
race, gender, and other identity-based leadership practices (Eagly & Chin,
2010; Kowalski-Braun, 2014; Manuel, 2006; Richardson & Loubier, 2008;
Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sawyer, Salter, & Thoroughgood, 2013). In
addition, scholars of this work have explored intersectionality as applied
to individuals in work settings. There has been very little work applied to
students and how intersectionality can be used as a lens for their leadership
development. In this section, we outline the connections between the con-
cept of intersectionality and popular leadership theories and models often
used with students in high school or college.

How we understand leadership has shifted and evolved over time. One
narrative frames leadership as moving from industrial models (e.g., great
man theory, trait, situational) to postindustrial models (e.g., relational lead-
ership, social change model of leadership development; Northouse, 2012;
Rost, 1991). When we ask students how to define leadership, often they
share characteristics, traits, or examples of leaders, not leadership. For ex-
ample, many might discuss charisma, outgoing personalities, or ethical be-
haviors, which are perhaps good starting points but ultimately insufficient.
Additionally, much of how individuals talk about leaders or leadership is
informed by the sociopolitical times in which they live. For example, if
we look at the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter movement, students can
point to examples of a flattened hierarchy within a social movement that is
centering race in the United States, largely by using social media to organize protests. This example of leadership looks very different from more traditional views of leadership as positional titles and high degrees of hierarchical structure within organizations. Two of the #BlackLivesMatter movement’s founders, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors, also identify as Black queer women and often reiterate that the movement is one that affirms the intersectionality and interconnectedness of all Black lives (BlackLivesMatter, n.d.). These women serve as powerful examples to students regarding the possibility that exists from cultivating a movement to challenge inequities and make positive social change (see Ginwright, 2015).

When using intersectionality as a lens, it can be helpful to apply the concept to commonly used leadership theories and models. For instance, elements of relational leadership (Komives et al., 2013), social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), and emotionally intelligent leadership (Shankman, Allen, & Haber-Curran, 2015) connect to concepts of intersectionality. If we consider intersectionality and its emphasis on examining power dynamics and structures (Mitchell, 2014a), many of the assumptions of these theories, which are all rooted in the postindustrial paradigm (Komives et al., 2013), become somewhat powerful and occasionally provocative. For example, a common assumption inherent in each of these models is the understanding that leadership is a process, not a position (Komives et al., 2013; Shankman et al., 2015). This emphasis allows leadership to be accessible to everyone, regardless of their social identities, whereas previous understandings of leadership suggested only those with dominant identities (e.g., White men) and those with positional roles and power would be seen as leaders.

As we consider the ways in which intersectionality and leadership are often connected, it is also important to examine the ways we maintain and reinforce certain gendered notions about leadership, which can be particularly difficult or damaging. In his work on genderqueer student leadership, Jourian (2014) highlighted that as leadership scholars and educators have encouraged a move away from binary views of leadership by gender (i.e., masculine versus feminine leadership styles), it would serve all students better to be more inclusive about the wide spectrum that exists within gender and how this spectrum may play out for one’s leadership practice. This argument is important for leadership educators to consider. For instance, consider how leadership educators talk about and teach leadership. In classes or workshops, leadership educators might use examples of leadership in action by trans* or gender-nonconforming individuals rather than examples of individuals who identify as men or women. To take this even further, one could name individuals representing multiple diverse backgrounds by race, gender, class, sexuality, and other forms of identity to help students identify individuals who may have similar backgrounds and identities to them. Additionally, in curricular or cocurricular leadership programming on campus, leadership educators might consider the ways that the
language used in marketing materials upholds the gender binary through the use of specific pronouns (i.e., “he” or “she” rather than more gender-expansive language) or conflating gender and leadership to only discussions about women and their leadership. These practices are essential to grapple with as we begin to consider intersectionality and leadership in praxis.

Intersectionality in Leadership: From Theory to Praxis

Educators and practitioners using existing paradigmatic theories of college students’ leadership development as frameworks or approaches in their work are well positioned to include intersectionality frameworks in leadership education practice. For instance, the social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) holds, at its core, the principal notion that self-awareness is key to the development of socially responsible leadership. Awareness of the intersectional elements of one’s social identity is critical in terms of understanding one’s positionality in social systems. Educators and practitioners can help students to develop awareness of their own intersectionality by facilitating workshops or class sessions in which reflections and conversations regarding the social construction of identities are featured prominently. Identity mapping activities (e.g., identity wheels or social group membership profiles), for example, can help students to explore their social identities and examine how they may experience privilege or oppression through their social group locations (Griffin, 2007). Engaging in activities that cultivate students’ understanding of cultural proficiency, using storytelling and other possible avenues for critical self-reflection can be powerful opportunities for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Terrell & Lindsey, 2008).

Tatum (2010) offered examples of the types of critical questions that can encourage students to understand the complexity of identity development as it is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by historical, social, and political contexts. For instance, reflection questions such as “Who am I?,” “How am I represented in the cultural images around me?,” and “What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks?” can facilitate students’ self-awareness of their social identity intersections (Tatum, 2010, p. 5). We recommend questions such as these be attended by alternative questions with connections to leadership—“How do my social identities affect my personal leadership identity? In what ways do my social identities affect others’ prescriptions, expectations, or assumptions about my leadership style or abilities?”

Along those lines, awareness of one’s own intersectional social identities can serve as a catalyst for deeper understanding for the experiences of others as well. Kouzes and Posner’s (2014) model of the five exemplary practices of leadership conveyed the significance of self-awareness in students’ development of relational, collaborative, and values-based leadership. In other words, an expansion of self-awareness can awaken students’
abilities to better understand the lived experiences of other individuals, such as their classmates, who exist at different social identity locations. Such work can be grounded in conversations about leaders across the globe who are often referenced as exemplary leaders—and how our own views of leadership have been framed through these lenses. Relatedly, Shankman and colleagues’ (2015) work on emotionally intelligent leadership, and specifically the capacity of authenticity, provides a framework through which students can explore what authenticity is and the reasons some individuals may have difficulty publicly displaying authenticity. For example, genderqueer or trans* students may find challenges in being authentic in ways that their cisgender peers may not if they are in environments that are chilly or even hostile toward individuals who do not conform to the gender binary. These types of learning opportunities that situate theory onto students’ lives can be transformative opportunities for critical self-reflection.

Conversations about the conflation of power and leadership can yield fruitful opportunities for intersectional analyses of gender and leadership. We encourage educators and practitioners to help students unpack some of the ways in which these perceptions of leadership are gendered—why, for example, in patriarchal systems, “power looks ‘natural’ on a man but unusual and even problematic on a woman, marking her as an exception that calls for special scrutiny and some kind of explanation” (Johnson, 2006, p. 91). An example of this “gender problem” is Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of the United Kingdom who was often referred to as the “Iron Lady” (Johnson, 2006). Johnson (2006) discusses that such a moniker “drew attention to her strength as a leader and the need to mark it as an exception” and how there would be no such need to draw attention to the power of a male prime minister “because his power would be assumed” (p. 91). Such case-in-point examples should be included in leadership development workshops, classes, or discussions, and we encourage educators and practitioners to help students unpack some of the cultural expectations of women, which include “silent attentiveness, hesitation, self-doubt, humility, deference, supporting what men say and do, and taking up as little space as possible” (Johnson, 2006, p. 93).

Finally, we encourage practitioners and educators to personally reflect upon their own gender identity amid intersections with their other social identities to understand their own positionality (Soria, Roberts, & Reinhard, 2015; Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014). In framing the construction of communities of student leaders—whether in the classroom, in student organizations or activities, or in other developmental opportunities—we advocate leaders embrace Singer’s (1991) conceptualization of a “community at loose ends” (p. 121). This notion of community requires us to embrace difference, fluidity, and engaged dialogue and discourse to promote a rejection of traditional hierarchy and an emphasis on flattened power structures (Singer, 1991). In such a manner, students can be encouraged to view community development work as complex because
communities are “constituted by members who embody multiple, conflicting, and overlapping identities” (Varlotta, 2001, p. 58). It is important that students develop an understanding that communities, like individuals’ social identities, are dynamic, constantly in flux, and socially constructed (Varlotta, 2001). Leadership educators are well positioned to help students negotiate and renegotiate member and group identity through lenses that embrace intersectionality (Varlotta, 2001).

Concluding Thoughts

Boyer (1997) asserted that “teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well” (p. 24). We maintain that leadership educators, at their best, can intentionally use concepts of intersectionality and leadership together to help their students gain greater awareness of themselves, others, and the systems in which they are a part. As we contemplate the ways contemporary thinking on leadership and gender have evolved over the years, we encourage leadership educators to be bold forward thinkers by creating meaningful learning opportunities through their curriculum or programs for their students to understand how power, privilege, and oppression operate in their daily lives and make positive social change in the world for a more just and equitable society.

References


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