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Pushing Against the Margins: African American Leaders and the Powerful Praxis of their Stories

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About Us

- As collaborative critical autoethnographers, we are both participants and researchers (Ellis, 2009; Chang, 2008; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

- Shaquanah, a Black woman in her late thirties, is a middle school curriculum specialist and teacher trainer.

- Alyncia, a Black woman in her early-fifties, is a college dean.

- Jim, a white male in his late sixties, is a retired principal and current doctoral instructor.

About Us

Bowen, A.M., Robinson, S., & Lane, J. (2021). Black female education leaders and intersectionality: Leadership, race, gender, power, and social justice. in S. Rodriguez & K. Brown (Eds.), (2021). *Black and brown Leadership and the promotion of change in an era of social unrest (pp. 101-123)*. IGI Global.
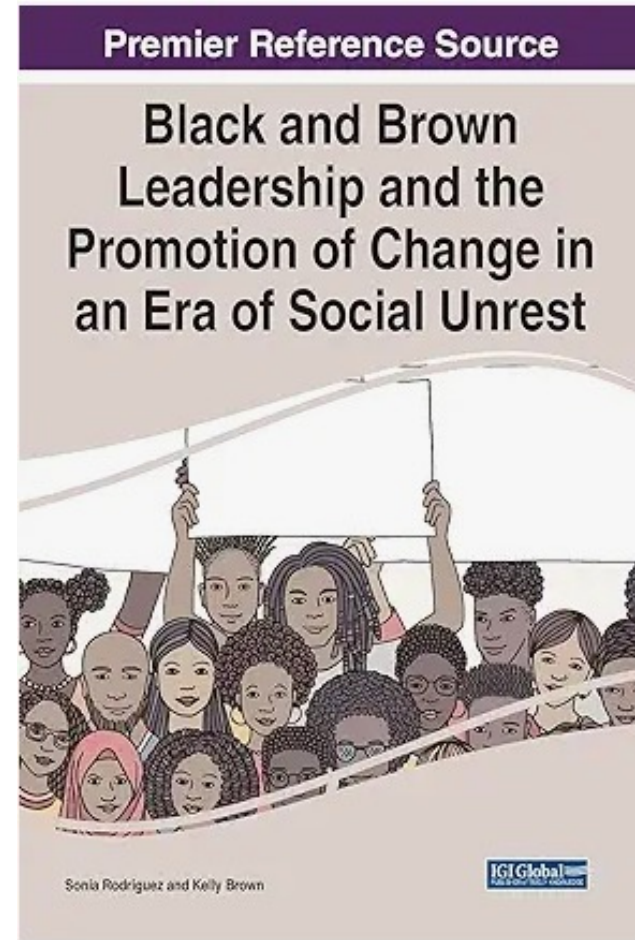
About Us
Proposed Edited Book

Dimensions of Intersectionality and Leadership: An Application of Multiple Lenses

The purpose of this edited book is to explore the relationships of intersectionality and leadership as an evolving framework. Researchers from various fields are encouraged to apply intersectionality to contemporary issues as a means of understanding complex social issues and promoting more inclusive and nuanced analyses across disciplines. We seek perspectives of men, women coupled with the race, gender, class, and sexuality.

About Us
Proposed Edited Book

Some suggested topics are as follows:

- Diversity of intersectionality and leadership
- Leadership
- Trauma
  - Behind traumatic experiences even in HBCUs, their experiences have not hindered them but has leveraged them as they deal with others.
- Mental health
- Healthcare disparities
- Criminal justice: arrests rates, sentencing, incarceration, etc.
- Global feminism
- Education equity
- Workplace diversity and inclusion
- LGBTQ
- Disability
- Public Policy

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"Race is a chimera - both a grotesque monster and a figment of our individual and collective imaginations. … (It) is deeply woven into the nation's fabric in ways that make it nearly impossible to unravel without tearing the whole society asunder" (Ladson-Billings, 2020, pp. 225, 227).

Background

Over the past decade, the fabric of American culture has become more frayed.

Police killings of people of color have seemed escalated, represented by the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Tyre Nicols.

Background

State legislatures and school boards across the country began using dystopian rhetoric to errantly apply the banner of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to any curriculum designed to educate students about the impact of slavery (Sawchuk, 2021; Waxman, 2021).

FL HB 7, *Stop WOKE Act*

In April 2022, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," which prohibits lessons or trainings that teach **that individuals are inherently racist or sexist because of their race or sex, that people are privileged or oppressed due to their race or sex, and other related concepts**. The law specifies that teachers can discuss "racial oppression, racial segregation, and racial discrimination" in an "age-appropriate" manner.

FL HB 7, *Stop WOKE Act*

"Examples of theories that distort historical events and are inconsistent with State Board approved standards include the denial or minimization of the Holocaust, and **the teaching of Critical Race Theory, meaning the theory that racism is not merely the product of prejudice, but that racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons.**"

Freire and the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

A theory and a practice for a critical pedagogy to question the status quo in the name of social justice.

The theory and practice involved a situated pedagogy, which could be adapted for diverse places, different stakeholders, and varying conditions.

This situated pedagogy proved a rich lexicon of practice: a dialogue method of instruction, problem posing inquiry … conscientization or coming to critical consciousness … praxis or action/reflection – cyclically theorizing practice and practicing theory.

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Freire and the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Thus, the central goal of pedagogy of the oppressed is to awaken in the oppressed the knowledge, creativity, and constant critical reflective capacities necessary to unveil, demystify, and understand the power relations responsible for their oppressed marginalization and common.

Through this recognition, begin a project of liberation through praxis, which, invariably, requires consistent, never-ending critical reflection and action" (Freire, P. (1968/2018). pp. 1-2).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory, purposed "to remind its readers how deeply issues of racial ideology and power continue to matter in American life" (Crenshaw, et al., 1995, pp. xi-xii).

Microaggressions

We identify experiences as *microaggressions,* defined by Solórzano as "one form of systemic everyday racism that serves to keep those at the racial margins in their place ... layered assaults based on the race, gender, class … of a person of color" (2020, p. 178).

Problem

African American educational leaders often lead their schools amidst a milieu of microaggressions and populist policies imposed by many state legislatures, restricting educators in ways they can address racial diversity.

Purpose

We seek to understand and describe how experiences of microaggression have shaped the world views of African American school leaders.

We seek to understand the ways they support racial equity and fight social injustice.

We seek to understand how these leaders may apply the concepts of Freire in their work to support and educate their students.

Research Questions

RQ1: How have racial microaggressions shaped leaders' individual experiences and approaches to leadership?

RQ2: How have the intersections of race, gender, culture, and power shaped leaders' perceptions of embedded racism?

RQ3: How have leaders applied the praxis of dialectic – discussion, refection, and action – to dismantle racial injustice within their schools and communities?

Methodology and Data Collection

- Survey through Survey Monkey to capture demographic and background information

- Zoom focus group conversations

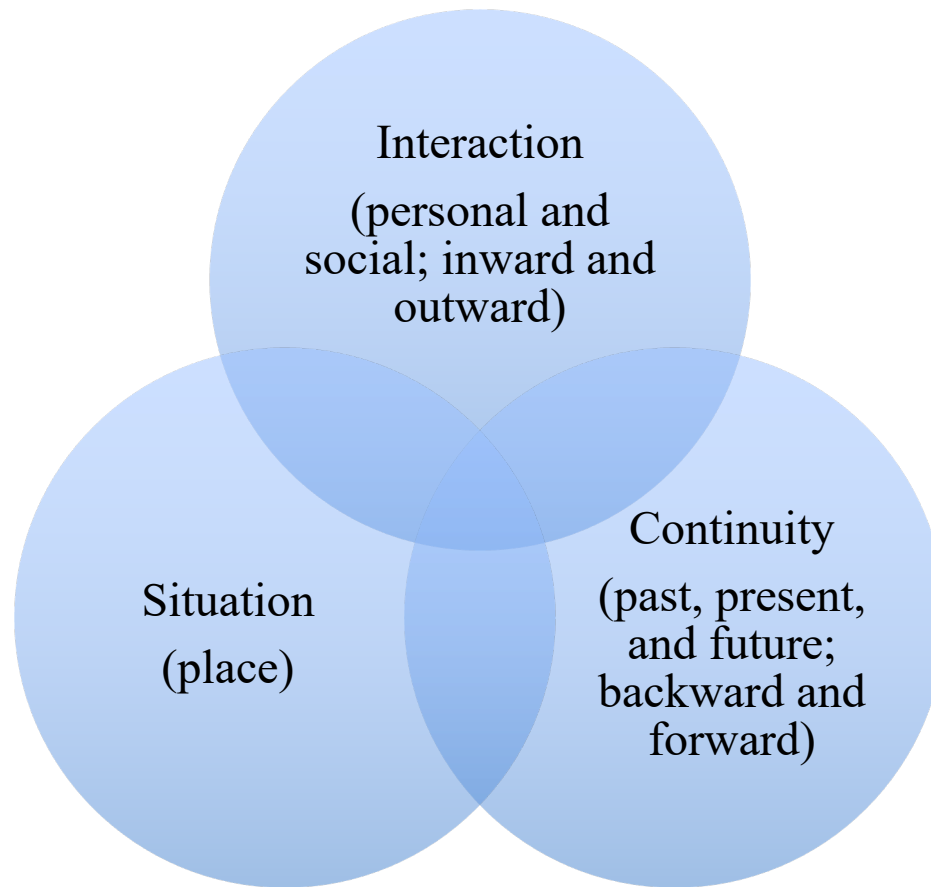- A written personal narrative expanding on the topics.

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Study Population

- We present personal narratives from African Americans who serve or have served as educational leaders in PK-12 or higher education.

- We define educational leaders as one who is in a position of influence and power within a K-12 or college setting.

- Participants are chosen through purposive sampling.

- African Americans comprise 10% of K-12 public school principals (NCES, 2021).

Conceptual Framework: Three-Dimensional Space

Interaction (personal and social; inward and outward)

Situation (place)

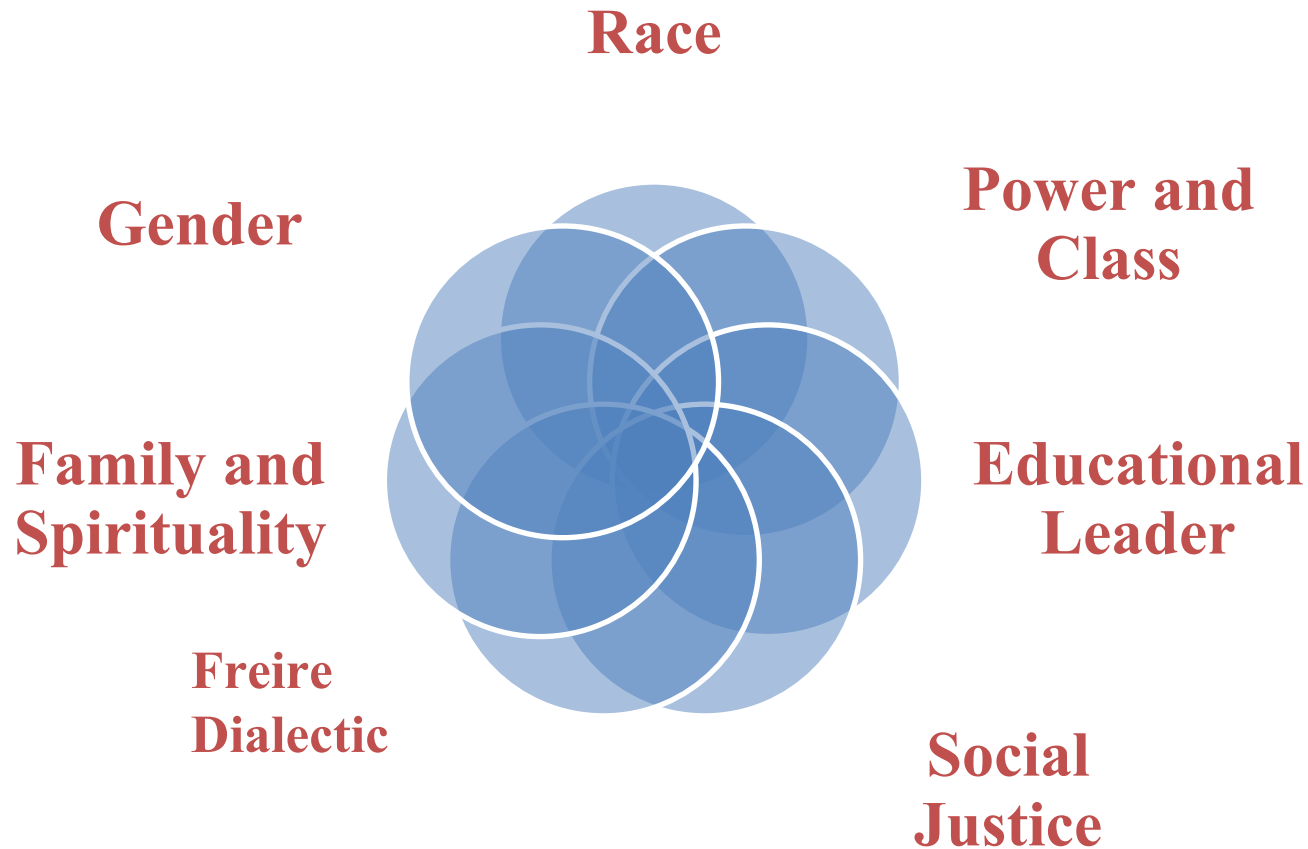Continuity (past, present, and future; backward and forward)

Intersectionality

Crenshaw posits the use of *intersectionality* to "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1995, p. 358).

Stovall (2020) observes, "As engaged researchers, because our lives are intersectional, our research should reflect said intersections (p. 198).

Conceptual Framework
Intersectionality

Race

Gender

Power and Class

Family and Spirituality

Educational Leader

Freire Dialectic

Social Justice

Results
Intersection of Race

But when I got there, you know, some of the Caucasian support staff did not greet me as openly, not with open arms.

She is going to turn this school into an inner-city school.

Over the years you have to build this reputation of being an advocate for children. Once they realize you're an advocate for children, they will support you.

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Results
Intersection of Gender

I even got accused – you do things because you can; which is something that is kind of the reputation of a lot of black women in our district.

Most of my parents are young, black, single moms. And in the beginning, I got more pushback from those parents than any other parents. Believe it or not, I think that it stems from it being foreign to them ever seeing someone young, black and female in that type of leadership and that type of position.

Results
Intersection of Power

I was glad to be offered the opportunity to walk through the doors and take the role as principal.

I was able to make some gains, and in that regard, I was able to make some changes; because I was recognized as number one, I wasn't backing down to number two.

I wanted to prove that it was leadership that starts at the top, not the students and not the staff.

Results
Intersection of Educational Leader

As so I think that the stereotype that comes along with being a black woman in leadership is that you can make it happen

I have helped to pull that school up and pull it up from an F to a C.

Results
Intersections of Family and Spirituality

But with faith and collaborating with each other, we're able to get though; and in this business, we find that we have to rely on each other as fellow administrators.

I knew that God had something for me because what is for me is for me.

I knew who my leader was. My God was, and I knew what I could do, and I knew what He had prepared and planned for me. I always follow the motto, the biblical scripture of to whom much is given much more is required.

I can do all thing though Christ who strengthens me.

Results
Intersections of Social Justice

I fought that battle a lot because I'm like, so you're telling me that black kids can't. I fought that battle.

The turnaround for me was built around building relationships and building trust.

You're gonna reward hard work with more hard work. This was very disheartening. I grabbed my tears and just went on to do what they asked me to do.

Results
Intersections of Social Justice

As a leader, I was transferred from one school to the next because of race. I've always worked well with people so there were never any microaggressive comments made towards me—at least not to my face. Now, do I believe things were said behind my back, of course? Why else would they transfer me somewhere else?

Yes, for the most part, most of it has come from my own race. The one that I have heard the most (this happened from a leader) and I couldn't tell if he was saying it as a joke or if he was serious, but he said "You ain't got to be all proper all the time. We know each other and you can chill out some of the time." The other I've heard before is "You're the whitest, black person I know or something like that.

Results
Intersections of Social Justice

We were taught to work harder than other races. As a matter of fact, we were taught that we had to work harder than other races.

We will have to get to the place where we are brave enough to select new leaders. Not school leaders, but our elected officials, governors, senators, congress representatives, etc. We have to examine the law and how it is and has been written for years to purposely target a certain group of people. It will take us getting people in positions of power who have experience with other races and want to see them succeed the same.

Results
Intersections of Social Justice

Racial injustice doesn't necessarily come from the outside. It happens within. We fight against ourselves a lot of the time. I think because it (racism) has been in existence for so long, sometimes it's hard to go and undo some of the things that have been done.

I work in an inner city school and just like any place, you are going to have challenges. I think because of the population, the community I serve, the challenges are more severe. The trauma, the impact is greater. Not only are we dealing with the kids being low academically, but they deal with challenges at home and in turn impact how they interact and perform everyday.

Results
Intersections of Social Justice

I've always tried to approach situations by always being professional. I keep all opinions out of the equation and stick to the facts that are relevant to educating students. When you stick to the facts, it cancels out any space for inappropriate feelings in both personal and professional space.

Oftentimes being a black female leader you are perceived as being angry or always having an attitude when really, you do the same thing a male would do but it is not perceived that way. It is perceived as she thinks she knows it all or she's better, and I think a lot of it has to do with my gender and my race.

Results
Intersection of Race

As expected, we have found race to be a significant intersectional role in the professional lives of our participants. Most believe they were placed in their position because they are Black. Some believe they are limited to their school because of their race.

Each participant shines as an educational and instructional leader. Each sees herself as a role model for all children, but especially for those who look like them.

Reflections

Participants actively promoted diversity and supported marginalized students in daily practice in several ways. These included **constant communication, building relationships among faculty, parents, and students empowering students, and, perhaps most significant, serving as role models for students of color study.**

All felt were restricted by the system and were not as proactive as they would like to be. While none have described a formal process as proposed by Freire, **all showed a constant process of praxis, of reflection and action, to support their students and enact systemic changes.**

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Reflections

We believe that sharing stories is among the most relevant and viable applications of qualitative inquiry. Our participants are eager to share their stories and for their experiences to reach both within and beyond the academy. Although strong figures within their schools and communities, they are often marginalized within the larger culture.

These leaders believe that through sharing the stories of their challenges and achievements, they can build a greater awareness of the struggles they and their students face. While their approach is less confrontational than Freire proposes, they are no less determined to improve the lives of the students and communities they serve. We see qualitative inquiry as a vehicle to help them succeed.

Freire's Central Questions

➢ **What kind of world do we live in?**

➢ **Why is it like that?**

➢ **What kind of world do we want?**

➢ **How do we get there from here?**

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