The Race-Gender-Equity-Leadership Matrix: Intersectionality and Its Application in Higher Education Literature

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Abstract

Intersectionality is a proven theoretical framework, offering a lens to explore how multiple identities and interlocking systems of power influence equity for historically underserved groups. This paper, with its unique focus on Black/African American women as a unilateral demographic, applies the multi-level intersectionality model to elucidate how race and gender converge to impact the educational and leadership experiences of Black/African Diasporan women. By illustrating the model's utility in research, policy, and practice, it not only sheds light on how systems of privilege shape opportunities and (in)equities for underrepresented groups, particularly within the context of higher education and leadership, but also provides actionable insights that empower policymakers and practitioners to make a difference. Framed within the context of higher education in the United States, this research underscores the need for more attention to race-gender diversity in higher education, as education and leadership are, in many ways, a manifestation of attainment and self-actualization. These insights can guide the development of effective policies and practices that promote equity and diversity in higher education, offering tangible solutions to the persistent challenges faced by Black/African American women in these spheres.

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Intersectionality Theory (and Why it Matters)

Understanding intersectionality theory is critical to comprehending the real-life dynamics of race and gender (Collins, 2004; Styhre & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). The premise behind this critical framework is that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power. Thus, people identify with more than one monolithic category or social group and can simultaneously experience both the advantages and disadvantages associated with membership in these differing groups (Crenshaw, 2000). This understanding is particularly urgent in the context of higher education, where equity remains a pressing issue (see Cargile & Woods, 1988; Hatch & Mommsen, 1984; Schiele, 1994; Palmer et al., 2013; Warren-Gordon & Jackson-Brown, 2022). The urgency of this issue calls for immediate attention and action from all stakeholders in higher education, highlighting the need for comprehensive and inclusive policies and practices.

Intersectionality theory draws attention to power imbalances conferred by our social context and disrupts simplistic and essentialist notions of identity to highlight how life experiences comprise various intersecting and sometimes oppressive elements. For example, as noted, Black/African American women experience a distinctively gendered form of racism coalesced with a racialized form of sexism (Collins, 1990, 2004; Collins & Bilge, 2016, 2020). From this integrative Black feminist perspective, constructs and categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality are not considered autonomous nor mutually exclusive categories to be measured and analyzed. Instead, intersectionality theory moves beyond merely adding one category to another in a statistical or theoretical model (Zerai, 2000). In the context of leadership, intersectionality theory is requisite for examining the interactions of gender, race, and

professional background and how the confluence of these factors and associated perceptions and experiences informs leadership identity and differences in leaders' behavior and efficacy. Nonetheless, despite gaining increased prominence as a frame for understanding the nuances of diverse social interactions, most extant leadership studies have not fully considered the interplay and consequences of multiple lived identities.

As is the case with dialecticism, "the philosophical concept that the world consists of opposite but not necessarily opposing ideas or concepts which, when put together, either negate each other or synthesize into a whole" (e.g., man + woman = a couple; right-wing + left-wing = government) (Collinsdictionary.com, 2022), it is essential to unpack the many intersecting elements at play as one navigates the academic sphere, especially within the realm and context of leadership. Dialecticizing intersectionality (Gunnarsson, 2017) is necessary for the work to confront existing notions of "intersectional categories as somehow both separate and inseparable while emphasizing only one pole in this duality when being more explicit about the issue of in/separability" (p. 125). The results and implications of, and more work in, this regard will produce a deeper understanding of the different factors determining management identities, development, and efficacy.

To recap, there are two primary reasons why the application of intersectionality theory is necessary for advancing leadership studies. First, "intersectionality aims to reveal the multiple identities and personas of social actors, exposing the connections between those points" (Richardson & Loubier, 2008, p. 143). Second, it "suggests that analysis of complex social situations should not reduce understanding to a singular category; rather, it should facilitate the understanding of substantively distinct experiences from the effects of inextricably connected roles and situations" (Richardson & Loubier, 2008, p. 143). The promise of this integrative

approach for examining leadership diversity is supported by recommendations from Jackson and colleagues' 2001 study. These scholars concluded that "multi-disciplinary work may also stimulate new approaches to measuring diversity" (p. 807). The narratives stemming from this and other related work of this nature will be productive in determining "which attributes are most closely associated in everyday cognitive stereotypes and self-concepts" (Jackson et al., 2001, p. 807).

Core Ideas Regarding Intersectionality

Intersectionality allows researchers to engage analytically and dispositionally in examinations of interlocking educational injustices (Collins & Bilge, 2016, 2020; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016). It is often described as a way for researchers to highlight the relational aspects of human connections and society (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Cho et al., 2013). Crenshaw (1991), credited as the originator of the term intersectionality, identified three forms of intersectional analysis: structural, political, and representational. These forms refer to concurrent, overlapping structures of subordination in which marginalized people are situated, the material consequences of interactive oppressions, the erasure of people's experiences at the intersections of numerous subjugations, and the cultural construction of negative stereotypes used to discredit people's marginalized experiences.

It is important to emphasize that intersectionality emerged through a critique of identity politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As such, essentialist understandings of identity were evident within many forms of radical and liberal feminism, [proposing] to unite women around a falsely universalist identity of 'womanhood.' Moreover, numerous anti-racist movements failed to identify how women of color experienced racism uniquely and differently from Black/African American men. Further, intersectionality theory seeks to re-focus our collective attention on

systems and structures rather than on the identity of any single individual. While individuals might stand at the crossroads of various intersecting oppressions, proponents of intersectionality assert that systemic oppressions are and remain inextricably intertwined at a structural level (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Countering critiques that intersectionality is simply an identarian framework (Carbado et al., 2013), Hancock (2013) posited that empirical research incorporating intersectionality has gone beyond the politics of identity (i.e., race, gender, and sexuality) to analyze power imbalances that shape structural manifestations of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, and heterosexism), while also noting the following issues: (1) a lack of attentiveness to the historical context of experience lived by study participants, (2) the cyclical, marginalized aspects of their social locations, and (3) the privilege and agential aspects of their social locations and relationships. Perhaps the most well-known statement of interlocking oppressions is bell hooks' analysis of the U.S. political system as an 'imperialist, White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (1981, 2015). While descriptions of intersectionality abound, there are few analyses of how it has been used methodologically across the social sciences (Gross et al., 2016).

The core ideas of intersectionality can be readily applied in the educational and leadership spheres. Its use in the study of education and management can potentially strengthen transformational leadership as an educative tool, explicitly focusing on intervening in interrelated systems of oppression. First, the emphasis on the experiences of social groups, social structures, and social oppressions challenges methodological individualism with analysis of individual–organizational relationships and practices (Evers & Lakomski, 2013, 2015). Second, intersectionality theory supports critique and researcher reflexivity on how education and

education research are transformed by ways of relating, knowing, being, and leading (Agosto &

Roland, 2018; Roland, 2018).

The Complexity of Intersectionality
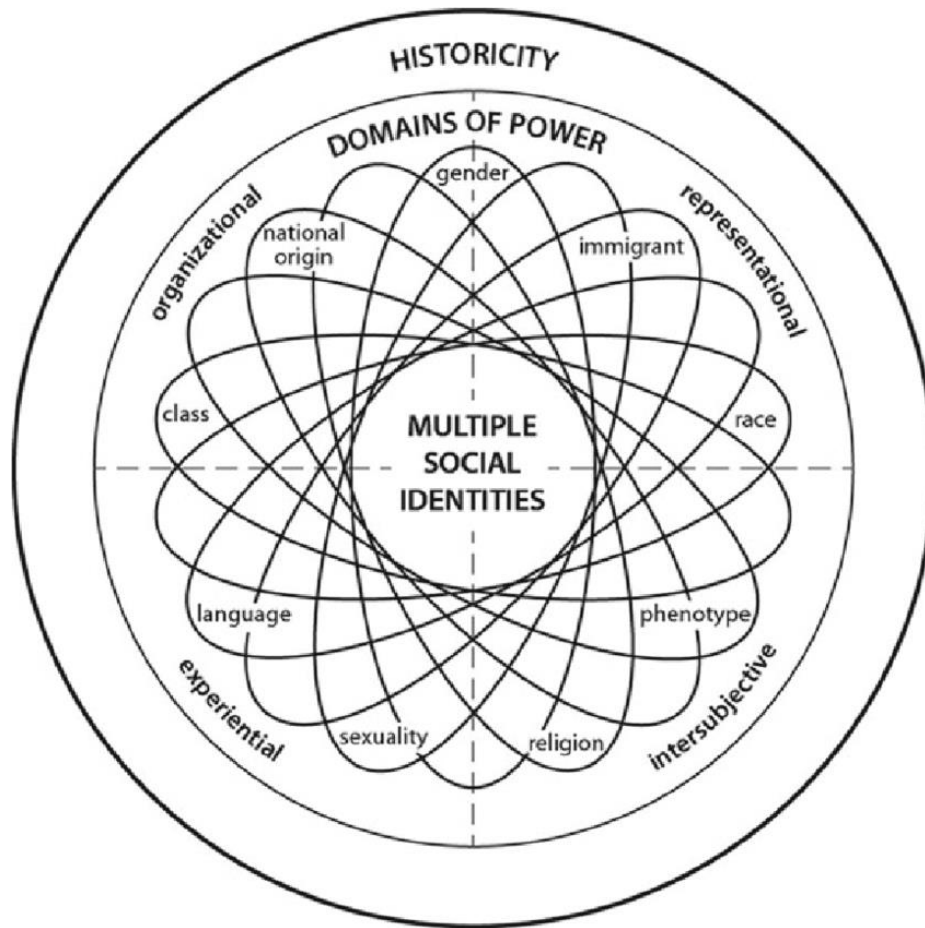
Figure 1 – *Multi-level model of intersectionality*[1]

Researchers in this sphere have become acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a

single analytical category, especially considering that feminism alone does not speak universally

to and for all women. In fact, intersectionality is widely regarded as one of the most important

theoretical contributions across various interdisciplinary fields. Inasmuch as scholars have

embraced the premises of intersectionality – the relationships among multiple dimensions and

modalities of social relations and subject formations – it has become all the more important to

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[1] Núñez, 2014, p. 87

see it as more than a single, categorical unit of analysis (Núñez, 2014; Styhre &

Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008).

Yet, despite the growing emergence of intersectionality as a pivotal paradigm of research

in women's studies and elsewhere, there has been little discussion regarding how to

methodologically study this phenomenon. Further, the current state of affairs can be traced back

to what – arguably – has been a chief characteristic of research in this arena:

> The complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple
>
> dimensions of social life and categories of analysis. In a nutshell, research practice
>
> mirrors the complexity of social life, calling up unique methodological demands. Such
>
> demands are challenging, as anyone who has undertaken the study of intersectionality can
>
> attest. (McCall, 2005, p. 1772)

This, in turn, directly impacts the scope of knowledge that can be produced about

intersectionality, assuming that different methodologies produce differing kinds and bases of

knowledge (Carbado, 2013; Shelton, 2000).

A remnant and pressing issue is to overcome the disciplinary boundaries based on the use

of varying methods to embrace multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality. Just because

parts of a methodology are more akin to one discipline than to another does not mean that the

method as a whole is not part of an interdisciplinary program (McCall, 2005). The overall

methodology – by orientation – is interdisciplinary, but the methods and specific subject matters

remain, to some extent, shaped by existing disciplines – primarily because of the division of

substance that the fields support and because particular methods are appropriate to specific

subject matters (McCall, 2005). There is nothing wrong with this in and of itself; in fact, it is a

much more expansive and radical notion of interdisciplinarity since it is not limited by default to

any specific discipline. The development of intersectionality theory as a new field has been somewhat partial, and this unintended consequence is a matter of course in the development of any new field, something that the new arena must continually resist (Cho et al., 2013a, 2013b).

Intersectionality and its Application in Higher Education

As an analytical tool, intersectionality has the potential to lead and transform higher education into a sphere that provides individuals – particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds – with more equitable access to economic and social mobility, particularly in a society that has been traditionally characterized by longstanding social inequalities (Hurtado et al., 2012). Consequently, higher education scholars have recently identified intersectionality as a lens to investigate how numerous social identities across differing institutional contexts shape educational processes, trajectories, and outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2014; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). The intersectionality lens brings attention to both structure and identity in the reproduction of inequalities. Thus, the conceptual and empirical work on higher education and intersectionality is presented to advance the conversation around intersectionality and its applicability in higher education research (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Harris & Patton, 2019).

One element that is particularly important to understanding how race and gender influence enduring discrepancies is the nature of existing schemas that are held about leaders (i.e., "Women "take care," Men "take charge," Prime et al., 2009). The role of a leader may be especially problematic for women due to the deep-seated notions that people generally hold of male leaders/managers, which are considerably dissimilar from those they have of women. Similarly, much evidence suggests that the prevailing preconceived image of a leader is more similar to that of a middle-aged White man than that of a Black woman (Polston-Murdoch,

2013). These sentiments have been obtained from all types of respondents, young and old, male

and female, across races/ethnicities, and are generalizable across culture and time (Agosto &

Roland, 2018).

Generally speaking, a woman in a management role potentially activates two conflicting

schemas: "a feminine schema traditionally associated with her gender and a masculine schema

associated with her role as a leader" (Becker et al., 2002, p. 229). Further, for Black/African

American women, actors and observers may have differing perceptions of racially

underrepresented leaders due to their preconceived notions, coupled with the focus on different

aspects of these conflicting schemas (Deaux & Major, 1987). Thus, the leadership role schemata

are more salient to the actors, whereas the race and gender schema are more salient to the

observers.

Dill and Zambrana (2009) highlight four main analytical tasks embedded in the study and

development of intersectionality:

1. Placing the lived experiences and struggles of marginalized people as a starting point for the

   development of theory,

2. Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity,

   recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized,

3. Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and

   oppression, and

4. Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a

   holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education

   institutions. (p. 5)

In this context, we highlight the intersection of race, gender, and leadership in shaping Black/African American women's leadership journeys. This piece situates itself within the field of Black/Africana Studies by examining higher education's impact on the academic experiences of Black/African Americans, African Diasporans, and other marginalized groups, as intersectionality provides critical insights into how multiple identities and interlocking systems of power influence equity for historically underserved groups. We connect the multi-level intersectionality model to the four main analytical tasks embedded in the study and development of intersectionality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Focusing on Black/African American women as a unilateral demographic, we analyze the race-gender dyad to shed light on how systems of privilege shape opportunities and (in)equities for underrepresented groups in the context of higher education and leadership. Underlining Black/African American women's experiences underscores the need for more attention to race-gender diversity in higher education, as education and leadership are, in many ways, a manifestation of attainment and self-actualization. As such, and given Black/African American women's concurrent race-gender realities, further compounded in and en route to leadership, we unpack these four themes below.

Theme One: Socially Constructed Identity and Leadership

Placing the lived experiences and struggles of Black/African Americans, African Diasporans, and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory

The theme, *Socially Constructed Identity and Leadership*, reflects Amir's (1969, 1976) contention that "the emphasis in American studies on attitudes and behavior of the White majority group has led to consideration of minority group members almost exclusively in their role as 'objects' and of the White majority group as 'subjects'" (p. 321). As such, one practice is the tendency to focus on Whites as active perceivers and Blacks as passive targets. In the typical

experiment on prejudice/bias/discrimination, Whites are treated as participants who can provide researchers with information, whereas Black/African Americans are treated as a relatively homogenous and amorphous group in the form of photographs or experimental confederates.

Considering gender, women have struggled against a masculine form of leadership for many years. Indeed, gender identity has been socially constructed along the typecasting of binary norms (Butler, 1990; Davis, 2008). Scholars have long noted that gender is a social phenomenon categorizing a physical body that places a person into one classification or another (Lorber, 1994, 2005; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is the body that sexes one as male or female, a necessary social concept based on difference. Only when the social categorization is disrupted, and our preconceived notions about the roles of males and females and their expected behaviors are challenged do we pay attention to how biological sex is transformed into gendered constructs. More broadly, indicators and symbols of this nature tend to be so omnipresent that we usually fail to notice them unless they are ambiguous or contradictory. We feel a sense of social balance by successfully placing people into societally constructed categories (Lorber, 2005). In the context of academia and higher educational leadership, a sphere in which upward mobility is generally supported, placing the lived experiences and struggles of African Americans, African Diasporans, and other marginalized groups as a starting point for theory development is all the more necessary.

Theme Two: Race and Gender Intersectionality in Higher Education

Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized

Taking a theoretical and methodological approach to examining intersectionality in higher education to provide a new interpretation of the literature on Black/African American

women in this social context, a synthesis of (N = 60) research studies revealed that (1) identity, (2) confidence and persistence, (3) achievement, ability perceptions, and attributions, and (4) socializers and support systems are important themes within the experiences of Black/African American women in higher education (Ireland et al., 2018, pg. 226).

In this same vein, the current analysis of the body of literature encourages researchers and professionals in higher education to consider how an understanding of intersectional experiences can advance their scholarship and practice toward a future where Black/African American women are unhidden figures and all academics feel encouraged to fulfill their highest academic potential. This paper also highlights the ways that researchers have employed intersectionality to make the experiences of Black/African American women in higher education more visible, i.e., "unhidden." A discussion of these findings from a psychological perspective will provide insights to guide future research and practice directions in higher education.

Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), in *Women and Women of Color in Leadership: Complexity, identity, and intersectionality* detail the challenges and barriers that women and women of color face in their quest to achieve and perform in leadership roles in work settings. They discuss the dimensions of gender and race and their impact on leadership and use ideas concerning identity and the intersection of multiple identities to understand how gender mediates and shapes women's experiences in the workplace. They conclude with suggestions for research and theory development that may more fully capture the complex experience of women who serve as leaders.

Together, this and other studies focused on the experiences of Black/African American women in and en route to leadership seek to continue undoing the rendering of them as "hidden figures" by more adequately addressing the simultaneity of Black/African American women's

intersectional experiences in educational and leadership contexts (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Johnson & Fournillier, 2022, 2023; Jordan-Zachery & Wilson, 2017). Moving this needle forward involves expanding higher education research to bring awareness to interlocking systems of oppression that contribute to the social reproduction of inequities in postsecondary educational trajectories and outcomes, particularly to and for those in academia and in academic leadership. The answers therein would undoubtedly lead to the creation of a more expansive conceptual framework for addressing societal power dynamics in higher education (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014).

Shelton (2000) maintains that when confronted with the complexities of prejudice, "researchers cannot afford to limit themselves to studying prejudice from the perspective of Whites. Many argue that in the research that does focus on Blacks and prejudice, Blacks are studied primarily in terms of their reactions to prejudice" (p. 374). Pertinent to the contexts of both race and gender, this piece challenges researchers to consider the race-gender-dyad, examining how racialized and gendered attitudes and behaviors influence intergroup dynamics within and between these subgroups, both small- and large-scale (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Harris & Patton, 2019; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999).

Theme Three: Confronting Race, Gender, and Historically-Based Discrepant Perceptions of Leadership

Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression

How can higher education research, then, be framed to further illuminate how interlocking systems of power, privilege, and domination shape equitable access and opportunity for groups from unique social identities? Removing barriers to advance the development of

women's leadership will not occur at colleges and universities unless pertinent members of the

institution are willing to critically examine the climate and culture of these institutions. In

Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality, Dhamoon (2011) found that women leaders

who embrace resistance strategies worked collaboratively to critically examine their

organizations and helped to remove barriers. Through coalitions, asserted Dhamoon (2011), the

women who participated in this study advanced the value of difference and shared authority,

created more inclusive forms of decision-making, and fostered a concern for the development of

the individual and the community. Qualities of this nature are essential to success, particularly in

today's complex and pluralistic organizational environments. These same characteristics will

likely continue to be necessary for centuries to come (Deaux & Major, 1987; Polston-Murdoch,

2013).

This work is consonant with the literature on the actor-observer bias (Jones & Nisbett,

1972). Therefore, the pattern of perceptual discrepancies seen in extant research can be explained

by the fact that observers (subordinates) are inclined to be more influenced by the salient

characteristics of the actor. In contrast, the actors (leaders) tend to be more influenced by the

norms and cues present in the given situation. In instances in which the gender of the actor was

especially salient to observers (i.e., a female leader in an 'out-of-role' position) or when the

situational norms were particularly salient to actors (i.e., for high self-monitoring women in out-

of-role settings), perceptual discrepancies were intensified (Becker et al., 2002).

Theme Four: Intersectionality as a Consensus-Creating Signifier

Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions

Employing a critical sociocultural theoretical framework wherein many of the "post" dialogues help examine difference, power, subjectivity, and context through the use of everyday literacy and language practices, this piece explores how Black/African American women navigate (in)equality and use communication (i.e., bringing 'voice') as both a means for reparation and an action for collective community building that fosters interconnectivity and alliance. This focus on the connective perspective seeks to provide insight for higher education leaders interested in cultural identities, critical theories, subjectivities, and the ontological process/science of being. In an increasingly diverse, pluralistic world (Jean-Marie et al., 2009), there is a growing tendency for people to move across discourse communities to gain entrance, all while extant members simultaneously seek to retain community control, power, and access to resources (i.e., inter- and intra-community competition).

In terms of securing – and maintaining – their positions, Black/African American women leaders fight the socially constructed norms of leadership (Coleman, 2003). Foremost, these norms put them at odds with both their gender and racial compositions. As Schmuck (1996) points out, "politically and personally, women administrators are torn between being segregated into a culture of women and being integrated into a culture of men" (p. 282). Women, for the sake of their sense of resiliency, begin to resist, then, their gender. Because of the simplified theories about gender and leadership, women's presentations of themselves appear to hinder as much as facilitate the promotion intention of other women (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999;

Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). For Black/African American women, these conflicts are further pronounced in accordance with their dually-embedded gender and racial identities.

Dillard (2012), in *The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership*, explored the lives of three Black/African Diasporan women leaders/researchers to "disrupt and unsettle[s] the taken-for-granted notions surrounding the very goals and purposes of educational research. By examining the life notes of these women, the author develop[ed]s an endarkened feminist epistemology" (p. 661). Located at the intersection of "culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities" was the need to uncover and highlight the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African-American women" (p. 661).

Drawing on other related scholarship, researchers continue to interrogate the conflicts, meaning-making processes, and the genealogies of intersectionality. Thus, the epistemology and ontology behind the 'rise of intersectionality' in a growing number of arenas remains a matter of central concern (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Some scholars in this realm argue that the lack of ontological discussions has, in part, led to its very popularity. Intersectionality promises much – to provide complexity, overcome divisions, and serve as a critical tool for expanding current and future research. Yet, the evolution of intersectionality as a consensus-creating signifier has only just begun in the continued work to advance social justice and change in higher educational contexts (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Johnson & Fournillier, 2022, 2023; Roland, 2018; Warner & DeFleur, 1993).

Intersectionality and its Application in Higher Education Literature: Moving Forward

The intersection of race, gender, and leadership significantly shapes Black/African American women's leadership journeys in higher education (Johnson, 2023; Ramdeo, 2023). Black/African American women face unique challenges due to the historical inequalities, racialized trauma, and gendered pathways they navigate in academia. Stereotypical expectations clash with traditional leadership characteristics when Black/African Diasporan women attain leadership roles, impacting their career progression and well-being. Structural barriers and intersecting identities influence the professional realities of Black/African Diasporan women leaders, especially in historically White academic institutions. Leadership stereotypes, gender, race, and ethnicity play pivotal roles in shaping Black/African Diasporan women's ascension to top positions in higher education, affecting their self-esteem and opportunities for advancement. The experiences of Black/African Diasporan women in education highlight the harm caused by intersectional invisibility (Showunmi, 2023) and emphasize the need for action to confront and eliminate these barriers.

That said, a primary challenge in intersectionality-based research remains the limited range of methodological approaches used to study it. More work in this arena will determine if and in what ways specific characteristics associated with quality leadership are stereotypically viewed as related to leaders' physical attributes. This will assist scholars in distinguishing between actual leadership abilities demonstrated and stereotypic perceptions. In addition, the provision of more samples, i.e., those who represent underrepresented communities based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, etcetera, is necessary to continue furthering these and other related conversations (Carbado et al., 2013; Okoli et al., 2020). Moving forward, the following are some

points to consider (see Figure 2 below) in the work to advance policy implications in this

capacity:
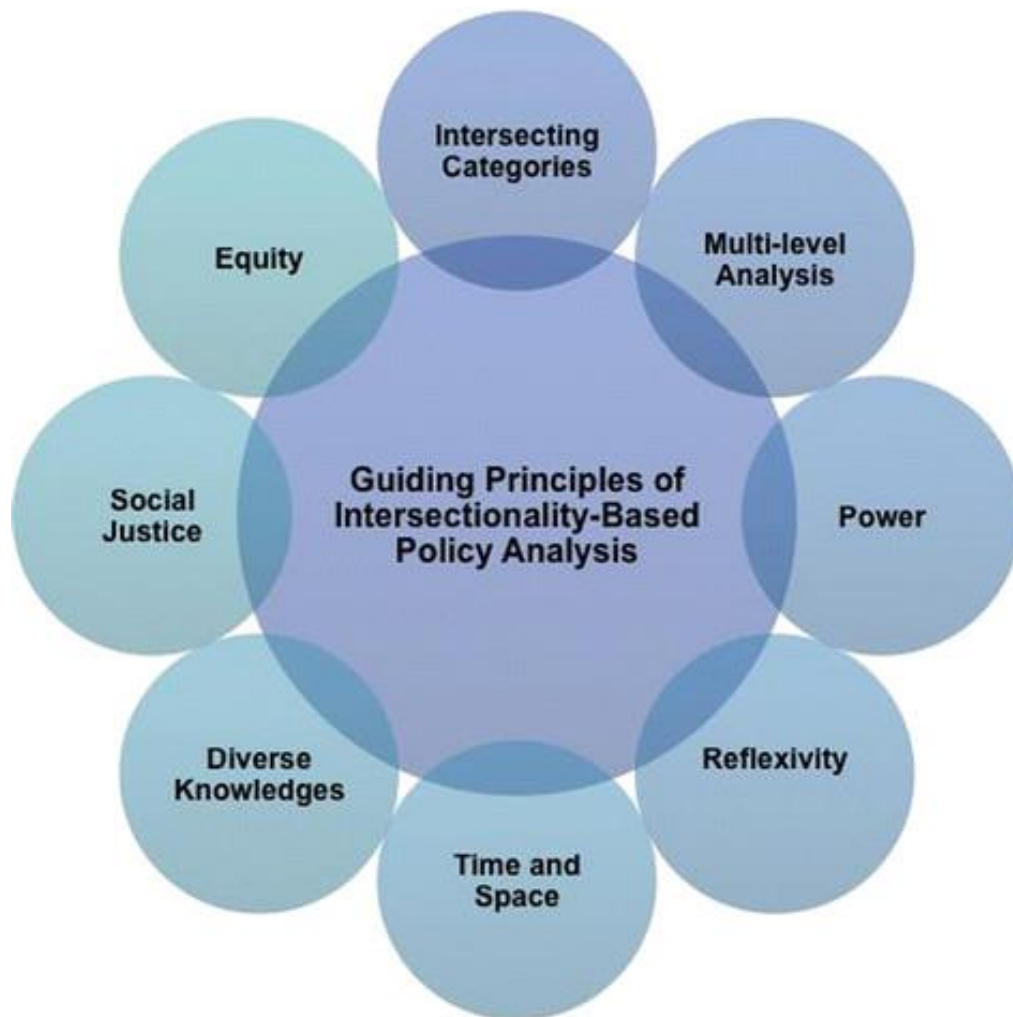
Figure 2 – *Guiding Principles of Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis*[2]

First, college and university administrators, faculty, and staff need to better understand

how traditional organizations have – and continue to – frame women's working lives through

White, patriarchal instrumental conceptions. An understanding of this nature should consider

both institutional and individual assumptions. Professional development education programs

should be designed and implemented to help institutions identify policies, procedures, rules, and

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[2] Hankivsky et al., 2014, p. 3

notions of headship that limit the success of women in their institutions. This collective analysis

allows women and men in leadership roles to make more informed decisions to support

inclusivity (Hankivsky et al., 2014; Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

Second, to facilitate institutional change, researchers need to study organizations in

which diverse management styles are included to move away from a "one size fits all" culture of

administration (Santamaría, 2014). By understanding how relational constructs are successfully

integrated into organizational life, those who commit their working lives to the academic sphere

will come to understand the range of strategies that may be needed to make change possible.

Finally, at the individual level, employees need to be challenged to confront the

assumptions they themselves hold about women and women's professional and leadership

capabilities. Extant research on behavioral patterns and communication differences among men

and women should be made available to facilitate understanding and respect for such differences.

Harmful stereotypes about women's in/abilities should be exposed for what they are, and new

models of leadership competencies should be installed in the culture. For example, although the

tendency for women to prefer relational viewpoints has long been studied (Belenky et al., 1986),

not all women use or see governance from a relational perspective. Some women, for example,

may prefer (and, in fact, may work quite well in) competitive environments. Still, again, their

success often results in negative comments and opposing views expressed by male colleagues

(Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). Undergirded in this piece is the fact that there is still much work to

do and accomplish in this realm (Pounder & Coleman, 2002; Santamaría, 2014).

Summary

An intersectionality approach speaks to a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990) of

broader interlocking systems of power and oppression – including racism, sexism, classism,

nativism, and others – that play out in institutions of higher education (Smith, 2009). By way of

this synthesis, we review literature from higher education and other disciplines that have

employed intersectionality as a framework. We explore intersectionality as a perspective that

informs higher education research and identify limitations in its application to higher education-

related research. By highlighting these limitations in other disciplines as well, such as legal

studies, feminist studies, and sociology, we speak to intersectionality's capacity to study how

interlocking systems of power and privilege continue to influence the life course of those from

historically underserved groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, 2015).

Traditional institutional-level theories, while centering on ideas such as politics, resource

allocation, efficiency, systems, and rationality, are generally under-equipped to uncover and

address intra-organizational problems linked to gender, race, and other people-specific

differences (Eddy & Khwaja, 2019). We argue that the conceptual lens of intersectionality – first

articulated in legal studies (Crenshaw, 1991) and subsequently applied in fields as diverse as

feminist studies, sociology, and political science – must continue in this same fashion. In this

respect, Cho et al. (2013a, 2013b) provide a conceptual approach to guide current and future

discussions about how variations in social identities and societal contexts constrain or support

access and success for underserved individuals.

An undertaking of this nature includes exploring constructs such as race, ethnicity,

gender, and other social identities in ways that value, in addition to simply exploring, matters of

pluralism and multiculturalism (Martinez & Welton, 2017; Winker & Degele, 2011). Thus, we

draw on multi-disciplinary literature about intersectionality to critique existing higher education

literature addressing the dynamics of privilege and oppression that augment or limit leadership

opportunities and success for underrepresented groups (e.g., Black/African American women)

(Al-Hindi, 2016). Intersectionality as a framework continues to necessarily challenge extant, dominant views regarding the typology of a "good" academic leader.

Closing

The article discusses the challenges faced by Black/African American women in higher education leadership roles due to systemic racism and gender discrimination (Azhar & McCutcheon, 2022; Ellington, 2022), highlighting the impact of power dynamics, oppression, and traditional equity structures on limiting opportunities for Black/African Diasporan women (Norander & Zenk, 2023). While the literature review emphasizes themes like confronting stereotypes and diverse management styles as barriers to Black/African American women's advancement (Russell, 2022), real-time evidence points to overt anti-Blackness directed toward Black/African Diasporan women in education and educational leadership positions (Blaha et al., 2023; Pillay, 2023). In concert with intersectionality theory, we point to the need for higher education institutions to move beyond superficial diversity efforts and ensure genuine inclusion of Black/African Americans, African Diasporans, and other marginalized groups in various ascending roles within and beyond the academic sphere (see Not MY Intersectionality, Hunt-Khabir, 2023).

Thus, future studies should be conducted to determine the reasons why leader traits and leader-initiated results are perceived and assessed so differently across the board. Researchers can then attempt to dissect why some leaders rely on extant stereotypes while others do not. Once these bases are identified, there is potential for the furtherance of theories and methods for deconstructing these stereotypes (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Research must respond to the needs of the underrepresented who navigate academic leadership spheres, particularly considering the role of academia as a site in which individuals – particularly those from

marginalized groups – are provided with equitable chances for upward mobility (Eddy &

Khwaja, 2019; Evers & Lakomski, 2013, 2015).

Salient stratification in higher education leadership along racial, gender, and

intersectional lines calls for more thorough analyses of inequities in higher education. Taking an

intersectionality approach is more than simply grouping people differently (e.g., Black/African

Diasporan women as a separate but monolithic group). Instead, intersectionality presses

researchers and policymakers to consider both inter- and intragroup differences (Davids, 2018).

By adopting an intersectional approach, higher education institutions can better address and

mitigate inequities that persist within their systems (Collins & Bilge, 2016, 2020). Furthermore,

intersectionality underscores the importance of centering the voices and experiences of

marginalized groups, such as Black/African American women, in research, policy, and practice

to drive meaningful change and transformation within educational settings. Ultimately,

embracing intersectionality as an ethical commitment can guide research aims, spark new

inquiries, and facilitate a more comprehensive comprehension of how higher education

institutions perpetuate and exacerbate inequities.

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