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Womyn of Color Leadership: Utilizing Differential Consciousness to Navigate Workspaces

Heather C. Lou

Womyn¹ of Color leaders working in student affairs face challenges navigating institutional roles while remaining authentic to non-dominant forms of leadership. In this work, I explore the concept of differential consciousness as a tactic for womyn of Color leaders to navigate workspaces. Differential consciousness is a concept within U.S. third world feminism and refers to a social movement that provides spaces for womyn from historically underrepresented, underserved, and “minoritized” identities to address dominance (Sandoval, 1991). I propose Sandoval’s (1991) theory of oppositional consciousness as a way for womyn of Color to navigate political workspaces in order to embrace authentic, non-dominant leadership styles. Additionally, I provide recommendations to apply Sandoval’s framework to student affairs practice as it relates to social justice and inclusion in postsecondary education.

According to The White House Project Report for Benchmarking Women’s Leadership, “women make up 57% of all college students, but only 23% of university presidents and 14% of presidents at the doctoral degree-granting institutions” (The White House Project, 2009, p. 23)—a troubling statistic that has not changed over the past ten years. Womyn of Color leaders accounted for 4.4% of all college presidents with more than 33% of this group identified as Latina as of 2006 (The White House Project, 2009).

As womyn of Color struggle to advance in leadership in United States (U.S.) postsecondary education and earn less in salary than their peers, student affairs administrators should better understand the ways that this underrepresented and underserved group navigates workspaces. Administrators serve students with diverse social identities, backgrounds, and narratives through advocacy work, but

¹ Womyn is a gender-independent spelling of “woman/en” that feminists and womanists adopted in 1975 as an opposition to institutionalized definitions of females according to the male-dominated societal norm. Womyn is intended to disrupt the gender binary and include those who identify with any intersection of historically “minoritized” identities, including, but not limited to: race, class, gender, and ability.

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discourse remains on ways to recruit, retain, and support womyn of Color leaders in the academy.

Womyn of Color leaders working in student affairs face challenges navigating institutional roles while working within dominant forms of leadership, which favor Western values of success. In this work, I explore differential consciousness as it applies to womyn of Color leadership and the opportunities it provides for empowerment and political savvy to counter Western dominance. Sandoval's (1991) theory of oppositional consciousness is a way for womyn of Color to navigate and potentially decolonize political workspaces in order to embrace authentic, non-dominant leadership styles. Additionally, I provide recommendations to apply Sandoval's framework to creating socially just and inclusive communities in postsecondary education for student affairs professionals.

Literature Review

Sociology, psychology, critical race theory, critical race feminist theory, and U.S. third world feminist literature can help administrators better understand the ways womyn of Color leaders might navigate political workspaces. Literature on womyn of Color navigating spaces outside of postsecondary education can translate to student affairs administration, as postsecondary institutions are microcosms of American society.

Theory of Oppositional Consciousness

Sandoval's (1991) theory of oppositional consciousness is rooted in U.S. third world feminism, which provides a different way of conceptualizing feminism and *oppositional activity*. In general, oppositional activity "comprises a formulation capable of aligning such movements for social justice with what have been identified as world-wide movements of decolonization" (Sandoval, 1991, p. 1). The tension between hegemonic feminist ideology and U.S. third world feminism lies within the need to refocus "two different understandings of domination, subordination, and the nature of effective resistance" (p. 1).

Womyn of Color may utilize Sandoval's (1991) theory as "the design for oppositional political activity and consciousness...to effectively challenge and transform the current hierarchical nature of the social order" (p. 2). Sandoval identifies four ideologies to navigate and transform spaces:

1. *Equal rights*. Under this oppositional ideology, subordinated groups "argue that their differences—for which they have been assigned a [socially constructed] inferior status—are only in appearance, not reality" (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12). Those who believe in the equal rights oppositional ideology believe that their

humanity and power should be recognized and social inequity should be resisted.

2. *Revolutionary*. Under this oppositional ideology, subordinated groups “call for a social transformation that will accommodate and legitimize differences... between social, racial, and gender classes” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12). Social inequity is recognized, and the subordinated groups’ desire is to create a new culture to uproot the power dynamic between dominant and subordinated groups.

3. *Supremacist*. Under this oppositional ideology, the subordinated groups “claim their differences, but they also assert that those very differences have provided them access to a superior evolutionary level than those currently in power” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 13). Those who subscribe to the supremacist oppositional ideology believe that due to social inequity, they have created more efficient, socially-just, moral, and ethical ways of leading.

4. *Separatist*. Under this oppositional ideology, “the subordinated do not desire an ‘equal rights’ type of integration with the dominant order, nor do they seek its leadership or revolutionary transformation” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 13). Those who subscribe to the separatist oppositional ideology protect and foster the subordinated and separate from the dominant social order altogether.

Differential consciousness. Sandoval’s (1991) theory addresses the limitation of Althusser’s (1970) theory of ideology and the ideological state apparatuses, as it “does not specify how and or on what terms” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 2) citizen-subjects can create change within and around dominance. Differential consciousness addresses the limitation of hegemonic feminist movements, creating a dynamic motion that functions “within, yet beyond the demands of dominant ideology” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 3). Metaphorically, the differential mode serves like “the clutch of an automobile: the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in the system for the transmission of power” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 14). Those who subscribe to differential consciousness are able to select, engage, and disengage between the equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist ideologies. Understanding ideologies may allow for administrators to shift between hegemonic feminism and oppositional theory to U.S. third world feminist theory, method, and oppositional theory.

Love as a method for social change. Differential consciousness functions outside of speech and within what Lorde, Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Sandoval define as love. U.S. third world feminists understand love as:

breaking through whatever controls in order to find understanding and community: it is described as hope and faith... a rupturing in one’s everyday world that permits crossing over to another; ... as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regard

less of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement. (Sandoval, 2000, p. 140)

Without enacting love, womyn of Color leaders are unable to access differential tactics and methods to decolonize political spaces and enact social change. Love can be demonstrated with music, gestures, images, sounds, and words that express counternarratives to dominant understandings of culture. By enacting differential consciousness and love as a method for social change, people's multiple truths can surface and provide space for coalition building, collaborations, and dialogue, a transformational tool Freire (1970) highlights in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Sandoval (1991, 2000) applies her theory to womyn of Color and oppressed populations in the context of U.S. society but does not suggest how this work applies to postsecondary education. The theory of oppositional consciousness and love as a method for social change are abstract and dense, and womyn of Color leaders in student affairs administration (regardless of their political savvy) may not ascribe their behavior in dominant and political workspaces to a U.S. third world feminist praxis. The following sections will provide examples of Sandoval's (1991) theory of oppositional consciousness and other U.S. third world feminist ideologies in postsecondary education.

Border Crossing and Ambiguity

Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of border crossing relates to the way womyn of Color leaders or *la mestiza* can stand between non-dominant and dominant workspaces and leadership styles. Borders can be physical, symbolic, or metaphorical spaces within institutionalized structures and policies or reinforced through socially constructed norms:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25)

According to Anzaldúa (1987), womyn of Color and other individuals who live within ambiguity learn to navigate through the borders and live between non-dominant and dominant worlds. This form of political savvy describes the ways of moving from convergent to divergent thinking. O'Brien (2008) states "race, gender, and class oppression have critiqued the false dichotomies of public/private, reason/emotion, and mind/spirit (among others) as creations of those in power and used to devalue feminine, non-European, working-class ways of being" (p. 68). Anzaldúa (1987) describes the way *la mestiza* engages in oppositional activity

that breaks down the subject-object relationship in dominant culture:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (p. 101)

By strategically straddling and crossing borders, politically savvy womyn of Color leaders are able to incorporate critical race and critical postcolonial theory to draw out counterstories in opposition to the remnants of colonial dominance (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Cross-Cultural Code-Switching: “Lived Contradictions”

Molinsky (2007) defines cross-cultural code-switching as “the act of purposefully modifying one’s behavior in an interaction in a foreign setting in order to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior” (p. 624). Cross-cultural code-switching includes behaviors such as: changing volume and tone of voice, dressing differently, (lack of) expression or emotions, and/or “proficiently execut[ing] a novel and possibly complex” (p. 624) task that fits into the new culture. Molinsky (2007) identifies three psychological states that describe the effects of cross-cultural code-switching: (1) performance difficulty; (2) face threat, and; (3) identity conflict (p. 627), which may create positive emotion (e.g. pride, confidence, empowerment) or negative emotion (e.g. embarrassment, anxiety, guilt, stress).

Cross-cultural code-switching causes dissonance as task performance often conflicts with personal and cultural values, especially for womyn of Color leaders moving between non-dominant and dominant leadership styles. Padilla & Chavez (1995) capture dissonance and cross-cultural code-switching in a qualitative interview with a Latina professor:

I am struck by my lived contradiction: To be a professor is to be *anglo*; to be a *latina* is not to be *anglo*. ... To be a Latina professor, I conclude, means to be unlike *and* like me. ... Can I be both Latina and professor without compromise? (pp. 74-75)

Can a womyn of Color in student affairs administration fulfill a leadership role in a space that honors dominant leadership styles without giving up culture, values, and non-dominant leadership? Richardson (2002) captures the ways Black and African American womyn educators utilize cross-cultural code-switching and border crossings between non-dominant and dominant spaces. Referred to as style/code-switching, Black and African American womyn educators engage in this behavior to dispel stereotypes institutionalized through policy and bias to help students

“decode texts and contexts” (Richardson, 2002, p. 698), and to make knowledge and resources more accessible. Sadao (2003) expanded on the way “bicultural” faculty appeared “willing to move between cultures, making the accommodations necessary for academic success” and “are ... very aware of situations that require ‘code-switching’... and make these adaptations quickly and smoothly” (p. 412). This is a challenge for womyn of Color leaders navigating political workspaces, but can also serve as a tool to master and decolonize dominance. Further research on cross-cultural code-switching should be conducted to better understand the ways it may affect womyn of Color leaders in student affairs administration.

Counterspaces

Womyn of Color may overcome marginality and stereotype threat by creating counterspaces (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). Counterspaces are physical and psychological places where people with “minoritized” identities can resist oppression and dominant spaces (Muñoz, 2009, p. 2). Affinity spaces are vital counterspaces where the non-dominant “group [can] find solidarity, provide one another support, and develop ways to challenge racism” (Everyday Democracy, 2008). Place-consciousness recognizes that spaces have “cultural meanings to individuals, groups, and societies” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 4) and may create ideological obstacles for womyn of Color leaders in navigating and decolonizing political workspaces. Castells articulated, “space is not a photocopy of society, it is society” (as cited in Muñoz, 2009, p. 9), demonstrating how navigating political, gendered, and racialized workspaces takes the savvy of oppositional consciousness in physical and psychic forms.

Transforming Postsecondary Institutions with Differential Consciousness

In *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Lorde (1983) related oppositional consciousness to the academic realm:

...survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes rivaled, and how to make a common cause with those... other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (p. 26-27)

Within a postsecondary educational context, student affairs administrators should not only honor the academic skills but also the experiential knowledge of politically savvy womyn of Color leaders. Student affairs administrators can continue to find value in dimensions of difference and pluralism within students, staff, and faculty. Administrators must also recognize that womyn of Color leaders are not responsible for teaching all members of the campus community how to better serve people with non-dominant identities. However, dialogue on differ-

ence is not enough to transform the institution of postsecondary education. For transformation to occur, perspectives of multiculturalism, feminism, racism, and assimilation to dominant culture in postsecondary education must be reframed. Instead, dialogue on difference, multiculturalism, feminism, racism, and dominance must be “acknowledged and engaged” (Ang, 1995, p. 193) to recognize diverse and multiple identities in the academy. All members of the campus community can continue to distinguish how intersections of identity, power, and privilege affect the multiple ways womyn of Color leaders psychologically and physically navigate political workspaces.

Niskode-Dossett, Boney, Bullock, Cochran, & Kao (2011) engaged in a “sisterhood circle” dialogue, or affinity group counterspace, and recommended actions womyn of Color leaders in student affairs administration (and their allies) can pursue to improve race and gender relations in postsecondary education. Several recommendations apply to womyn of Color leaders and colleagues who identify within aspiring ally practices:

- Be an advocate with language and actions;
- Shift from a monoracial to a multiracial paradigm;
- Be aware of power [dynamics] and labels;
- Do your own “personal [identity and social justice] work;”
- Do not just bring other womyn of color to the system; challenge it and support mechanisms for oppositional activity;
- Use your own power and privilege to advocate with other non-dominant identities;
- Appearance does not necessarily reflect the whole being of a person; and, finally
- Make time to mentor. (Niskode-Dossett et al., 2011, p. 212)

Womyn of Color leaders in student affairs administration and their aspiring allies can utilize U.S. third world feminist ideology and oppositional consciousness to decolonize political workspaces. By being aware of the ways womyn of Color (and other people who work within non-dominant leadership styles) experience the workplace, student affairs administrators can find ways to improve climate through inclusive policy, curriculum, equitable distribution of salary and resources, recruitment practices, and retention efforts. Promoting mentorship, networking, and professional development as well as conducting climate surveys and assessments are tangible ways for postsecondary institutions to better understand the ways people with non-dominant identities navigate spaces and politics. Mentoring relationships formed between womyn of Color and other leaders with non-dominant identities and dominant identities can be positive in increasing retention and promotion. Improving inclusivity and climate and fostering relationships for womyn of Color leaders in student affairs administration can also help students, faculty, and other

community members decolonize dominant practices at postsecondary institutions.

Conclusion

The question, “How does my identity as a womyn of Color leader in student affairs administration affect the way I navigate political spaces?” exists within postsecondary education. Better understanding of the way womyn of Color leaders experience physical and psychological structures in postsecondary education allows student affairs administrators to become more cross-culturally competent, to become more inclusive in practices, and to enhance aspiring ally behavior. By engaging in U.S. third world feminist praxis such as differential consciousness, womyn of Color leaders and aspiring allies can engage in dialogue and institutional transformation to better serve students, staff, and faculty with an array of diverse and complex identities.

This literature review serves to supplement existing research and to bridge interdisciplinary perspectives on womyn of Color leaders to student affairs administration. It is my hope that this literature review paves the way for new and innovative research to support people with non-dominant identities and leadership styles in the field of student affairs. Administrators at postsecondary institutions should explore more inclusive practices in order to create positive, empowering experiences for womyn of Color leaders, students, and other members of campus communities.

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