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Race, Gender, and Leadership by Parker, Patricia S. (2005). A Review by Janie Kelly, Marymount Manhattan College. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. ISBN: 1-4106-1125-6, 212 pp. \$24.95 (hbk).

The preface to *Race, Gender, and Leadership* boldly declares that “this book takes up the charge put forth by cutting edge leadership scholars to envision new forms of leadership for the 21st century” (p. ix). A key point of the book is that in criticizing traditional “masculine” forms of leadership and arguing instead for an alleged “female advantage” or “feminine leadership” style, feminist scholars have done little more than perpetuate notions of dualism. Furthermore, the model of feminine leadership portrayed in the popular media is based on the experiences of a “select few” predominately white middle-class women. As a result, “The female advantage perspective excludes the experiences of African-American women as well as other women of color and of different class statuses” (p. xv). Most important, it ignores the multicultural perspective that is essential to understanding and advancing leadership development in an age of globalization.

A major strength of the book is that Parker deftly avoids falling into the same dichotomous trap as the flag-bearers of the “female advantage.” Parker’s contention that the “race-neutral” attitude that pervades leadership studies allows researchers to generalize the experiences of an elite group of individuals (that is white, middle-class, privileged) is analogous to the argument against “gender-neutral” studies that led feminist researchers to pose an alternative model. However, Parker is not out to present yet another alternative model rooted in race *and* gender. Rather, she astutely recognizes that any either/or approach to leadership fails to capture the “the diversity among women’s (or men’s) experiences that shape leadership knowledge” (p. 8). While noting that the “female advantage argument provides an important critique of the patriarchal discourses that exclude women’s experiences,” Parker zeroes in on a significant flaw. Namely, “it fails to acknowledge that notions of feminine and masculine are social, cultural, and historical products, constructed according to racial and sexual ideologies that conscript women’s and men’s embodied identities” (p. 10). The identities and experiences of African-American women are conspicuously absent from leadership theory and research.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I is entitled, “The Need for Race- and Gender-Inclusive Visions of Leadership in the Postindustrial Era,” and Parker presents the case admirably. Part II focuses on “African-American Women: An Untapped Source of Leadership Knowledge.” From a socio-historical perspective, Parker explores the cultural stereotypes that surround the exclusion of African-American women from leadership dialogues, and at the same time, the ways that resistance to oppression generated a distinctive, and valuable, tradition of leadership. Part III, “African-American Women Executives and 21st Century Organizational Leadership” brings together the dominant themes of the book, illustrated by the narratives of 15 black female executives. The collective voices included the executives, subordinates, superiors, and the author’s detailed observations.

Although Part I effectively establishes a rationale for Parker’s study, it is the least compelling to read. Parker’s writing becomes much more vivid when she departs from the theoretical realm and describes “real world” influences and experiences, whether the focus is the degradation of black women during slavery or the emergence of black women in the corner office in postmodern business organizations. One of the most interesting sections is Parker’s account of Ella Baker as the embodiment of the leadership tradition of African-American women. Parker emphasizes that her focus is *organizational* leadership. How many times has the example of a grassroots leader appeared in organizational literature? The inclusion of women like Baker, whose story is told in admiring detail, highlights the point that there are valuable lessons in leadership historically excluded from traditional research.

Parker credits Baker with being “one of the major influences on the development of collective leadership in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement” (p. 55). Collective leadership is “grounded in a theme of community building”:

Just as enslaved African-American women combined an African heritage with American exigencies to forge networks of kin relations, and as 19th century clubwomen sought to unite African-American women in the rural and urban communities, Baker enacted a tradition that enabled people across class statuses, races, ages, religions, and ethnicities to identify with each other. (p. 57)

As described by Parker, Baker’s work illustrates strategies for advancing collective leadership derived from “African-American women’s traditions of resistance and transformation” (p. 56). The first strategy is *developing and using voice*. Cultivating and using one’s own voice and that of others is a technique for simultaneously calling for others to become involved in a collective effort and working against the “intrusion of hierarchy” (p. 56). One of Baker’s most famous statements was that “Everyone has a contribution to make. Just as one has to be able to look at a sharecropper and see a potential teacher, one must be able to look at a conservative lawyer and see a potential for justice” (p. 56).

In addition to unorthodox organizing techniques, indefatigable energy, and an optimistic and astute view of her fellow human beings, Baker’s strategies “emphasized self-definition and self-determination as a basis for long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women” (p. 57). Ironically, that may be what is lacking in contemporary models of leadership. Most scholars would call Baker a “transformational leader,” but Parker makes it clear that her unique approach to leadership goes beyond that. Parker also makes it clear that Baker is not the only African-American woman who displayed the qualities of collective leadership (Rosa Parks, ranks with many others). Nor did the vision of black women’s leadership end with the Civil Rights Movement. The legacy of Baker, Parks, and countless unheralded community leaders is evident in the narratives of the executives presented in the next section.

To continue the historical perspective, Parker begins Part III by noting that the personal histories of the executives are replete with the influences of mothers, fathers, and “othermothers,” as well as “contemporary and ancestral others in their extended families and communities that strengthened their identities as Black women and influenced their approaches to leadership” (p. 60). Regardless of their social class background, the predominant theme was “Don’t forget where you came from,” a powerful reference to “the history of struggle, survival, and triumph in African-American experience” (p.60). In addition to setting the stage for the narrative portrayals of the 15 executives, the introduction distinctly sets their experience apart from the white middle-class women on whom the notion of “feminine leadership” is built.

Parker discerned five major themes in the leadership approaches of the 15 women: 1) interactive communication; 2) empowerment through the challenge to produce results; 3) openness in communication; 4) participative decision-making through collaborative debate, autonomy, and information gathering; and 5) leadership through boundary spanning. Ironically, these five qualities reflect identified “best practices” in organizational leadership. However, as the narratives demonstrate, they are not simply rhetoric. They are exemplified in the philosophies and day-to-day behavior of the executives.

The use of multiple sources, a common strategy in business management resources, reinforces the point that the women are not simply portraying themselves according to the tenets of popular leadership styles. For example, a key characteristic of transformational leadership is the ability to formulate a vision and enlist others to share it. A staff member of one executive commented precisely on that quality, stating that she is “very good at molding her vision and goals into most all of her communications” so that they never lose sight of her long-range goals (p. 75).

A critical point is that the African-American women executives embody both traditionally masculine and feminine notions of leadership. Theoretically, that applies to all good leaders and leadership. The case studies presented by Parker demonstrate that it is not only a viable but a highly effective leadership approach. For example, one staff member said,

I think she’s very people oriented, but understanding that, she also wants action. She wants things moving in a positive direction. She’s not happy with the status quo... (p. 77)

While describing the executive as “very caring,” the staff member also commented, “She holds people accountable...if you’re not doing your job, you may not be here” (p. 77).

In a parallel fashion, one executive’s supervisor related,

I think she’s very direct. I think if you talk to the people who work in the organization, it is all business. That doesn’t translate to any lack of humanism...I think she is very compassionate. She really goes to bat for people, particularly if she believes that they’re trying to improve and that they’re working hard at it...but you better be improving. And she’s not sympathetic for someone who’s less than committed. (p. 77)

In many ways, the statements of the executives and their staff could easily come from accounts presented by leadership theorists like Warren Bennis, Peter Senge, or Jay Conger. However, by going beyond the race-neutral perspective, Parker challenges both racial as well as stereotypical notions of leadership. Even more important, the case studies make it evident that the exclusion of black women from leadership studies (or positions) impedes the advancement of 21st century leadership by eliminating valuable and constructive insights into what makes a good leader.

In-depth studies of excellent leaders almost invariably illuminate the myriad of ways that personal, cultural, and historical factors interact to form their character and behavior. Parker accomplishes this in her book using race and gender as a framework for understanding the experiences of her subjects. From a broad perspective, she makes a persuasive argument for the case that “we should continue to seek diverse sources of knowledge” (p. 88). African-American women do indeed represent an untapped, valuable source of leadership. A further implication is that in a multicultural, global society it is counterproductive as well as unethical to ignore the perspectives of diverse groups. As Parker concludes, “In the twenty-first century, leadership theorizing should reflect the interplay and struggle of the multiple discourses that characterizes postindustrial society” (p. 92).

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