

STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP EDUCATORS' NEGOTIATIONS OF RACIALIZED LEGITIMACY

Abstract

Critical and justice-oriented approaches to leadership are incomplete without attention to racism and racialization. This study employed basic qualitative inquiry to examine racialized legitimization within student affairs leadership education through lenses of whiteness as property and legitimacy. Findings detail how leadership educators sought to gain and/or maintain legitimacy and the ways racialization is embedded in these processes through professional experiences, leadership knowledge, and identity. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

Being involved in leadership and receiving validation as a leader have ramifications for students' success in college and beyond (Bensimon, 2007; Komives, 2011; National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2018). Higher education – historically and contemporarily – has continuously legitimated whiteness as leadership and white people as leaders (Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2014). If college student leadership programs intend to facilitate self-exploration, leadership self-efficacy, and socially responsible leadership development for all students (Komives, 2011), then leadership educators carry a great responsibility to facilitate equitable and inclusive leadership education and to combat racism in leadership education. However, leadership educators

themselves are situated within and negotiate these same oppressive systems. Thus, there is a need to examine how racialization, or the construction and production of racial meaning (Omi & Winant, 2015), shapes leadership educators' work.

Critical and justice-oriented approaches to leadership are incomplete without attention to racism and racialization. Whiteness functions as a form of domination within and beyond college campuses (Cabrera et al., 2017; Dugan, 2017); thus, it is important to detail how whiteness structures racial meaning through its embeddedness in colleges and universities (Cabrera, 2019; Gusa, 2010). However, whiteness also functions as a racial identity, creating a standpoint of privilege and structural advantage for white people (Frankenberg, 1993) because whiteness structures dominant institutions and society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Ray, 2019). In short, because whiteness is normalized and hegemonic at a discursive, ideological, and structural level, whiteness is constructed as the baseline for humanity and legitimate knowledge (Jung, 2015). Racialization processes largely reproduce the dominance and legitimacy of whiteness and white people. Thus, failing to identify and disrupt whiteness

in leadership education results in the continued marginalization and devaluation of People of Color as leaders and allows dominant leadership perspectives to persist, disproportionately empowering white people as leaders. Accordingly, whiteness and its connection to racialization and legitimation are this inquiry's focus.

Despite the aforementioned necessity to examine whiteness, whiteness has largely been neglected in leadership theory and research broadly (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) and college student leadership research in particular (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). This inattention to whiteness is especially concerning given Liu and Baker's (2016) claim that "'doing leadership' is inextricably linked to 'doing whiteness'" (p. 420). Practices and conceptions of leadership are often uncritically rooted in dominant – white and masculine – norms that privilege narrow ways of being and leading (GuramatunhuCooper et al., 2019). Ignoring whiteness in leadership theory and practice provides an incomplete understanding of leadership's racialized nature, as "[t]raditional leadership theory has tended to operate with color-blind or gender-blind assumptions... It makes western perspectives and 'whiteness' the default categories to measure the leadership experience of people from any race-ethnicity" (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, pp. 888-889).

Further, white racial identity persists as an important element in leadership prototypes, as racially minoritized leaders' legitimacy is undermined because of racism (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Rosette et al., 2008). Thus, racialization informs leadership legitimacy. Given whiteness's ubiquity in higher education and leadership theory, college student leadership programs likely perpetuate racialized constructions of leadership and further marginalization against People of Color. Therefore, research is needed to explore how racialization structures student affairs leadership education. Conceptualizing and facilitating leadership as whiteness devalues and delegitimizes people with marginalized identities, especially People of Color, as leaders. There is an urgent need to uncover and interrogate racialized legitimation processes in leadership education.

While college student leadership development scholarship has increasingly centered power and

social justice (Beatty et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2019; Dugan, 2017), research has not fully explored how legitimation shapes leadership educators' practices. To facilitate equitable and inclusive leadership education, leadership educators must critically interrogate their knowledge and practices, including the foundations on which leadership programs are built and the best practices that are amplified (Beatty et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2019; Dugan, 2017). Leadership educators are important gatekeepers of such leadership legitimacy and must also navigate these processes themselves. Therefore, student affairs leadership educators are this inquiry's focus.

Next, I explore student affairs leadership education literature, highlighting the dominance of white women and the lack of theorizing about racialization and legitimation. Then, I detail my conceptual framework before outlining my methodological approach. I integrate whiteness as property and legitimation to examine how racialized legitimation processes structure leadership education through basic qualitative inquiry. Finally, I offer findings and implications, highlighting how racialized legitimation processes shape leadership educators and their work. Efforts to facilitate inclusive and socially just leadership education must contend with how racialized legitimation processes structure leadership education.

College Student Leadership Educators

Student affairs leadership educators and the leadership programs they staff are the focus of this inquiry and literature review. While leadership is a core competency for student affairs educators, leadership education represents a distinct functional area. Leadership educators intentionally create environments and opportunities for students to engage in leadership development (Owen, 2012). While students build leadership skills and knowledge through experiences in college and beyond, these programs are important points for student engagement and success, relationship building, and leadership skill development (Dugan et al., 2013; Dugan & Komives, 2007). However, what constitutes

valuable leadership skills or knowledge varies based on the theories used, assumptions about leaders and leadership, and beliefs about student participants (Dugan, 2017).

Leadership educators face multiple priorities in developing and facilitating leadership education. Leadership educators seek legitimacy for themselves and the programs they staff while also conferring leadership legitimacy on students (Priest & Jenkins, 2019). Importantly, leadership educators negotiate these processes within institutions, structures, and ideologies that largely uphold whiteness as the leadership standard. The resulting leadership programs may reify certain students as leaders (e.g., extroverted white men) and may reify that other students (e.g., extroverted Black women; introverted queer folks) are not leaders, which invalidates students' diverse ways of leading (Dugan, 2017; Liu & Baker, 2016).

A contemporary body of work provides the foundation for knowledge about leadership educators, focusing on their demographics (Dugan et al., 2013; Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, 2019; Owen, 2012), pedagogical strategies (Jenkins, 2012, 2013), and professional identity development (GuramatunhuCooper & Lyons, 2017; Priest & Seemiller, 2018; Seemiller & Priest, 2015, 2017). First, leadership educators are overwhelmingly white and woman-identified, especially in co-curricular programs (Jenkins & Owen, 2016). Second, most student affairs leadership educators do not have a degree in leadership. Leadership educator professional identity development consists of exploration, experimentation, confirmation, and validation (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Through these developmental and socialization processes, many leadership educators draw on their experiences and past leadership roles to fulfill their leadership educator roles (Priest & Seemiller, 2018).

Student affairs leadership programs are often only seen as successful if they garner support from academic programs and/or senior institutional leaders (Rocco & Pelletier, 2019). In combination with the reality that many leadership educators lack formal leadership coursework, the predominance of white leadership educators begs for further investigation. If white leadership educators predominantly construct

leadership education and they construct leadership education based on their own values, experiences, and ways of knowing (Priest & Seemiller, 2018), they are likely constructing leadership in their own white reflections. Given leadership educators' needs to appeal to faculty and administrators' leadership beliefs, leadership educators may be limited in their ability and desire to transgress white patriarchal notions of leadership, should they risk losing institutional support.

Leadership educators utilize similar program structures and tools. Co-curricular leadership programs often use several leadership models: The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM), the Relational Leadership Model, the Leadership Identity Development Model, and the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (Owen, 2012; Rosch & Anthony, 2012). Overwhelmingly, white people authored these models and many other dominant leadership models (e.g., Servant Leadership, Charismatic Leadership). Additionally, Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) findings indicate many leadership programs are in the early stages of development (Owen, 2012). Developing programs may intentionally align with existing norms and best practices in search of legitimacy. Collectively, these insights uncover some of leadership education's legitimated norms.

White Women

In addition to prevailing leadership theories embedded whiteness, white women dominate student affairs and leadership educator roles (Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Robbins, 2016). In some ways, white women's prevalence in leadership education contradicts leadership's masculine dominance. Common student leadership development models are rooted in relational approaches to leadership, which some argue are more inclusive to women's ways of leading (Komives et al., 2013). However, such assumptions largely reinforce binary and essentialist gender notions (Owen, 2020). Historically and contemporarily, white women play powerful roles in excluding People of Color from whiteness's privileges (Harris, 1993). Research on white women's racial identity exploration demonstrates white women seek to be seen as good (Applebaum, 2010; Sullivan, 2014),

kind, and not racist (Linder, 2015) while resisting race cognizance through color-evasive discourses and emotional outbursts that further harm People of Color, particularly Women of Color (Accapadi, 2007; Watt, 2007). White women may talk about race in nice and color-evasive ways (e.g., attribute instances of racism to other causes) and respond with tears or anger when challenged (Accapadi, 2007; Wegwert & Charles, 2019). These discursive moves downplay racism's significance and center white women's feelings in the process. Within leadership education, white women's paths specifically have not been examined; however, much of the knowledge about leadership education and educators likely centers on white women because of their overrepresentation. Many leadership educators acknowledge that their paths to and validation within leadership education were shaped by prominent leadership education practitioners and scholars (Rocco & Pelletier, 2019), many of whom are white women. Thus, white women may be legitimated in their development and practice as leadership educators by other white women, protecting white womanhood as an unspoken credential for leadership educator legitimacy (Ray, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Student affairs leadership education research has not critically theorized racialization and legitimation's interconnections in leadership education. Leadership educators, theories, and pedagogies do not exist outside of racism's reach. Thus, I use whiteness as property and legitimation as conceptual frames to examine how student affairs leadership education is racialized.

Whiteness as Property

Whiteness as property, formally coined by Harris (1993), is a common Critical Race Theory tenet (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Harris (1993) positions the U.S. history of genocide and slavery as foundational to the formation of racial identity and property rights. The courts continuously legitimated whiteness as foundational to citizenship and property rights (Aggarwal, 2016; Harris, 1993). Importantly, property encompasses both physical objects and anything of apparent value, like whiteness (Annamma, 2015). One of the most important attributes of whiteness

as property is the right to exclude, or white people's ability to protect their rights by deeming others not white (Harris, 1993). Bondi (2012) demonstrated how white students in student affairs graduate programs protect whiteness as property, with learning as a form of property. White students expressed frustration and disappointment when they perceived Students of Color's experiences were centered. In response, white students argued that all students' contributions should be valued, while failing to recognize that historically, Students of Color have not been centered in classroom content or discussions. Thus, white students often excluded Students of Color and sought to protect their access to learning by centering themselves in the classroom (Bondi, 2012).

Whiteness also affords access in organizations. Ray (2019) argued that whiteness serves a credentialing function, connecting white gatekeeping to inequitable access to and distribution of resources (e.g., hiring, promotion, pay). Thus, whiteness as property is a valuable analytical tool, as it illuminates whiteness's function as more than identity by offering whiteness as an active entity, exercising power and securing rights at the individual, organizational, and societal level (Annamma, 2015; Harris, 1993; Ray, 2019). Whiteness's value is maintained through its exclusivity, much like leadership. Further, leadership education opportunities, like whiteness, afford valuable resources. Access to and attainment of leadership legitimacy is complex, influenced by multiple norms and processes that are implicitly and explicitly racialized. Next, I detail legitimation to illustrate how legitimation and racialization are intertwined processes that structure leadership legitimacy.

Legitimacy

I employ legitimacy as an additional conceptual frame to explore racialization within leadership education. Suchman (1995) conceptualized legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). Individuals, knowledge, social arrangements, organizations, and other entities can possess legitimacy and

often pursue legitimacy as valuable currency. Here, legitimacy is a form of property or capital, like whiteness, as legitimacy confers belonging. Legitimacy is constructed through social processes, known as legitimation (Johnson et al., 2006; Tyler, 2006). Thus, legitimacy is actively negotiated through multiple ongoing processes, like leadership. These features of legitimacy are helpful for considering the forces leadership educators navigate.

Maton (2000a, 2000b) connected legitimate knowledge, knowers, and context, arguing fields engage in relational struggles over status and resources where knowledge is structured and structuring. Said differently, leadership knowledge structures the field of leadership education and seeks legitimacy within existing knowledge production norms. In intellectual fields, social power and knowledge are intertwined, a reality highlighted by Apple (1999):

for particular kinds of knowledge to be a valued form of capital, the knowledge itself must be recognized both within that field of power as important and in the connections between that specific field and the more powerful fields as high status as well. (p. 344)

A field's norms provide criteria to accord status (Maton, 2000a; 2000b). Both knowledge and knowers must navigate legitimacy within their intellectual field, like leadership education. Faculty seek legitimation from colleagues (Gonzales & Terosky, 2016) and through publications and professional associations (Gonzales, 2013). Effectively, knowledge is legitimated by complying with existing norms, and knowers are legitimated based on their characteristics, like race and identity (Maton, 2000a, 2000b). However, a field's norms and local context shape legitimation, meaning that while some norms hold across leadership education, institutional and program contexts also shape who and what is legitimated (Gonzales, 2013; Maton, 2000b).

Whiteness structures U.S. society and dominant discourses in higher education through racialization processes (Cabrera et al., 2017). Legitimacy and belonging within higher education have long been properties of whiteness. Thus, conceptualizations of legitimate knowledge and knowers are powerfully shaped by racism, as non-white knowledge and knowers are continuously delegitimized across higher education contexts (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Giroux, 1992; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Patton, 2016). The legitimation of leadership knowledge likely parallels the legitimation processes detailed above, where legitimate leaders, leadership knowledge, and best practices are racialized. Thus, the legitimacy of leadership knowledge and leaders must be examined in the context of racialization. Given this imperative, I inquired: 1) What legitimation processes do leadership educators negotiate in their work? and 2) How are such legitimation processes racialized?

Methodology

I used basic qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to examine how leadership educators negotiate racialized legitimation processes. This study engaged 13 student affairs leadership educators from nine institutions in two semi-structured interviews each. Interviews are a valuable tool, allowing for a depth of understanding and systematic exploration of experiences, emotions, and meanings (Lamont & Swindler, 2014). Further, "interviews are particularly well suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their perspective on their lived world" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 116). Interviews facilitated a focus on leadership educators' practices and experiences.

I selected student affairs leadership educators for several reasons. First, based on my personal and professional experience, I assumed student affairs leadership educators likely had greater autonomy in determining what theories, tools, and practices are used in their programs than those in curricular programs. Second, given the diversity of disciplinary leadership programs and their associated leadership

framings, I believed student affairs leadership educators were more likely to draw on shared resources and conceptualize leadership comparably, given their similar professional preparation. It is likely that including leadership educators from disciplinary programs (e.g., business, agriculture) would illuminate whiteness differently.

educators from nine institutions participated in this study (see Table 1). I have not included geographical or institutional information to protect participant anonymity. Most participants were coordinators (e.g., newer professionals, higher levels of direct student contact) or mid-level managers (e.g., supervision of full-time staff, 5+ years of professional experience).

Participant Selection

To support this study's focus on legitimacy, I identified and selected leadership education programs that could be deemed exemplary. Exemplary leadership programs are more likely to represent ideal types of leadership education, such as those that have been legitimated as worthy and valuable within leadership education's norms. While the focus on exemplary programs likely reinforces whiteness, I assumed the leadership educators within these programs would engage in practices and utilize resources that reflect the legitimated norms of leadership education.

Initially, I drafted a list of about 20 exemplary leadership education programs at four-year institutions in the U.S. I used resources from entities like the Association of Leadership Educators, Leadership Educators Institute, NASPA's Student Leadership Programs Knowledge Community, and the MSL. There is no established ranking of best co-curricular leadership education programs, so I looked for programs that presented at conferences and consistently participated in the MSL. Then, I outreached to several renowned leadership education scholars who are familiar with co-curricular leadership education programs, asking them to share what programs they would identify as exemplary. After receiving their responses, I merged the two lists (mine and scholars'), which resulted in about 35 leadership education programs. I then refined my list for geographic and institutional diversity. I intentionally included programs staffed by People of Color, given the overrepresentation of white people in leadership educator roles. I recruited leadership educators across professional roles: graduate assistants, program directors, coordinators, and mid-level managers. I sent email invitations to 35 leadership educators at 16 institutions. After sending invitations and engaging in snowball sampling, 13 leadership

Table 1*Participant Overview*

Name ^a (n=13)	Race/Ethnicity	Gender ^b	Other salient identities	Professional role	Combined interview length (minutes)
Ava	White	Woman	Queer	Coordinator	83
Belle	White	Woman	Mother	Mid-level manager	77
Bernadette	White	Woman	Lesbian; Disability	Graduate assistant	77
Carol	Asian American	Woman	Disability	Coordinator	78
Charlotte	White	Woman		Mid-level manager	78
Claire	White	Woman		Mid-level manager	106
Daniel	White	Man		Program director	84
Erica	White	Woman		Coordinator	78
Hiram	White	Man	Father; Christian	Mid-level manager	82
Jackie	Black	Woman		Mid-level manager	123
Maura	White	Woman		Mid-level manager	76
Rebecca	White	Woman		Coordinator	82
Virginia	White	Woman	Queer	Coordinator	79

^a All names are pseudonyms. Further, all identities are self-reported.

^b All participants identified as cisgender.

Data Collection

In addition to collecting participant information (e.g., institution, education history, professional role, identities, length of time in current role) through a brief intake form, I conducted two interviews with each participant. First, participants and I engaged in 15-20 minute informational interviews. Informational interviews allowed me to answer participants' questions while also learning more about their experiences and building rapport (Spradley, 1979). Then, participants participated in an extended semi-

structured interview. The interview protocol was initially tested with several peers and was designed to prompt participants' reflections on their professional experiences and practices (e.g., professional journeys, theories, program structure, learning opportunities). Based on participants' responses to questions like "can you share more about how your lived experiences and identities show up in your work as a leadership educator?" and "can you share more about the resources you use to construct leadership education efforts?" I probed about the identities of people mentioned, if or how considerations of race and power arose, how participants came across

particular resources, and what affordances or challenges participants encountered due to their identities. I asked all participants the same final question:

One thing I have been thinking about, that I would love your reflection on is how we often use theories that were written by specific people in specific contexts with students today (e.g., the SCM was created more than 20 years ago). Often with students with different identities and experiences that the model's authors. Do these considerations shape your practice? How?

All participants were asked the same follow-up question to this final question: "Specifically, many of the leadership theories and models used were created overwhelmingly by white people. How does that reality shape your practice?" Combined interview lengths ranged from 76 to 123 minutes, averaging 85 minutes (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

I used constant comparative analysis (CCA) to integrate conceptual and participants' perspectives in analysis (Fram, 2013). CCA facilitates systematic data analysis by balancing emic, or within group, and etic, or outside of the group, perspectives (Fram, 2013). Given this study's desire to integrate racialization and legitimation within the context of leadership educators' experiences, CCA is a powerful analytical tool. I engaged in data collection and analysis iteratively. Through memos and journaling, I tracked my role in the inquiry process and emergent commonalities and findings (Charmaz, 2006).

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo 12. Then, consistent with CCA procedures (Fram, 2013; Glaser, 2008), I engaged in three rounds of analysis. First, I read each transcript in its entirety before beginning open coding. In open coding, I used both in-vivo codes, reflecting participants' own words, and descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout, I drafted memos, comparing codes across and within cases. Before engaging in axial coding (Glaser, 2008), I revisited

and reorganized codes constructed in open coding. Then, in moving forward with axial coding (Saldaña, 2016), I revisited all transcripts, deepening my understanding of codes' relationships to one another and to leadership educators' identities and past experiences. Throughout, I constructed memos to trace relationships among codes, legitimation, and racialization. Finally, I engaged in selective coding (Saldaña, 2016), where I returned to my research questions and examined data through my conceptual frames.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

My leadership education experience brings me to this work. As a white woman and former leadership educator, I am both deeply familiar with leadership education and benefit from and reproduce whiteness in leadership education. However, I come to this work to facilitate more equitable and just leadership education, a reality I shared openly with participants. I believe my transparency and shared leadership education experience facilitated trust and comfort among participants. My knowledge, identities, and experiences inform my epistemological commitments, interactions with participants, and the construction, analysis, and presentation of data (Maxwell, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Throughout, I centered curiosity to remain open to leadership educators' experiences and perspectives, even when they differed from my own. I relied on open-ended prompts like "tell me more about that" to better understand the intentions behind participants' narratives, and I often repeated back what I took away from their stories to confirm my understanding of participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

While qualitative research does not seek to provide a single, objective truth, multiple techniques were employed to establish a sense of trust and confidence (Maxwell, 2013). I primarily searched for negative cases throughout data analysis, looking for examples that refuted the patterns I identified. Searching for negative cases guards against the temptation to fit stories and findings into boxes

based on preconceived assumptions (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, beyond sharing transcripts with all participants for their review, I engaged both Women of Color and two queer-identified white women participants in a member checking process to empower their perspectives in my analysis. Given my desire to identify and challenge dominant power structures, this process ensured that participants with multiple marginalized identities had greater control of their own stories by confirming or challenging my representations of their narratives.

Further, these participants had a deep familiarity with leadership education across institutional contexts and also provided insight into the study's relevance for practitioners. Finally, I engaged in ongoing dialogue with peers throughout my research design and analysis process. The dialogue provided invaluable feedback in the construction of my interview protocol and my analysis. I intentionally engaged with peers with diverse racial, gender, and sexual orientation identities and with varying levels of familiarity with leadership education theory and practice.

Limitations

I have identified two primary limitations. First, in engaging leadership educators from exemplary leadership programs, my data largely reflect the experiences of cisgender white women leadership educators at four-year white-serving institutions. While most exemplary leadership programs are located at white-serving four-year institutions and overwhelmingly staffed by white women, research has mostly focused on this same population. Thus, future studies should center programs at more diverse institutions (e.g., historically Black colleges and universities, community colleges) and focus on those staffed by People of Color. Given the pervasive nature of whiteness, whiteness often still structures practices and norms, even in white people's absence. Additionally, leadership education efforts occur across college campuses, and future work should include the experiences of staff in diverse functional areas who identify as leadership educators. These staff members and their work have not been the focus of this study, and they would likely illuminate new possibilities and leadership education perspectives.

Findings

Throughout and across interviews, participants reflected on their paths to and through leadership education, the leadership theories and tools they used, and the varied considerations that shaped their work. Findings detail how participants sought to gain and/or maintain legitimacy and how racialization is embedded in these processes through professional experiences, leadership knowledge, and identity.

Professional Experiences

While each participant had a different path to leadership work, each spoke about their professional journeys in relation to how those experiences prepared them for their leadership educator roles. Many participants had meaningful undergraduate leadership experiences. Charlotte explained, "I came into college thinking that I wasn't actually a leader," before sharing about the transformative power of her undergraduate leadership experience. These prior leadership experiences often validated participants as leaders and exposed them to leadership language, sometimes through leadership theories, but more often from supervisors and mentors.

All participants had notable experiences in other functional areas like women's resource centers, fraternity and sorority life, and student activities, where leadership was part of but not necessarily central to their work. Further, many used these roles to develop leadership educator responsibilities. Maura shared that in a prior role, she told her supervisor that "I've been interested in teaching [leadership] classes [and] I want to volunteer with our LeaderShape program." Many participants gravitated towards leadership roles as opportunities arose. Past professional experiences played an important role in how colleagues perceived participants' legitimacy.

Professional Legitimacy

For example, Jackie, a Black woman, and Carol, an Asian American woman with a disability,

worked extensively outside of leadership education before their current leadership roles. Jackie's career in recreational sports provided her opportunities to bring leadership education knowledge to recreational sports. She was at the forefront of this work in recreational sports. Despite her depth of leadership education knowledge and expertise, she experienced imposter syndrome when she transitioned to a leadership educator role:

I was coming out of a unit in student affairs that isn't traditionally even seen as student affairs ... So, I think there was a level of imposter syndrome for me ... because of how certain units and areas are perceived in student affairs.

While Jackie was confident in her knowledge and past experiences, she recognized that her colleagues did not perceive her past experiences in the same way.

While Carol worked outside of leadership education before her current role, she is an alumnus of her campus's leadership program and has stayed connected with the program, even teaching leadership classes. When Carol began her leadership educator role, she told her supervisor that she "need[ed] to do some research on leadership development." Her supervisor told her not to worry about it. Carol took this response as an indication that a depth of theoretical leadership knowledge was not necessary to be a leadership educator, an opportunity for her to challenge existing norms, and as a signal of their confidence in her expertise. While this may be true, her supervisor later encouraged her to move away from the very student-centered approach she currently adopts because in order to "move up," she would need to spend less time with individual students and more time managing bureaucratic, politics, and programmatic changes. Thus, Carol received mixed messages about the value of centering students, her experience, and her knowledge. While encouraging Carol to focus on skills and responsibilities that would allow her to demonstrate her readiness for upward mobility may have been well intentioned, her supervisor invalidated her prioritization of student relationships, which is a way of engaging in professional practice that is often more aligned with women and People of Color's

ways of leading. For participants, their professional experiences powerfully shaped their breadth, depth, and comfort with leadership knowledge.

Leadership Knowledge

Participants' connections to and immersion within leadership knowledge are central to their and their programs' legitimacy. About half of the participants discussed close interactions with notable leadership scholars. Some of these interactions occurred through leadership conference sessions. However, several participants met leadership scholars through professional development initiatives on their campuses. Belle, a white woman and mid-level manager, explained this interaction's power:

[It] was very formative of not only connecting with her and developing that relationship with her after, you know, going to grad school and you're like reading her books and fan-girling over Susan Komives, but to actually be in a space and talk to her and learn about leadership from one of the premier leadership educators in our country was pretty profound.

Supervisors and mentors often connected participants to leadership knowledge and learning opportunities. Participants overwhelmingly mentioned white scholars and mentors. Mentors played formative roles in validating emerging leadership educator identities and sharing texts, research, and best practices. However, few participants experienced role modeling around critically considering race and racism in leadership education work.

Across interviews, participants rattled off the names of scholars, texts, and tools that shaped their expertise and informed their practice. In a way, these are household names for those in leadership education. Participants positioned opportunities to read texts, attend conferences, and translate knowledge to practice as central to leadership education work. Nearly all participants referenced the same relatively small body of tools and theories (e.g., StrengthsFinder, Servant Leadership, SCM, etc.), primarily authored by the same white scholars with

whom they interacted. There were three notable exceptions: first, those at faith-based institutions utilized additional leadership resources rooted in their campus faith traditions. Second, Jackie, who worked in an advanced interdisciplinary leadership program, sought to move from merely exposing students to theory to “[thinking] about how we’re actively applying it on our campus.” Thus, she relied on different tools. Finally, Carol spoke about working in a leadership program within career services where they mostly moved away from the SCM. Regardless of the approach, white scholars disproportionately authored the tools mentioned.

Social Justice Knowledge

Participants named considerations of social justice and identity as central to leadership education work. Although, for many white participants, social justice was a relatively new focus. For several participants, engaging with Dugan’s (2017) critical perspectives in leadership theory book was a turning point, sparking examination of their own identities and their program’s tools and practices. This meant utilizing the same tools while adding in space for critique and deconstruction. Virginia explained:

[Our office] like[s] John Dugan’s recently released critical perspectives piece. And that’s been really helpful, but I [hope the field will experience] a series of [scholars and practitioners] who are challenging and updating theories so that we can still use it while you know, not again like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Most participants chose not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” because they could not find better tools.

Four participants identified the Social, Action, Leadership, and Transformation (SALT) model (Museus et al., 2017) as a possible alternative. Scholars of Color created the SALT model to account for power, culture and identity, and explicitly detail “leadership that is socially conscious and facilitates transformation to achieve justice” (Museus et al.,

2017, p. 3). However, Virginia explained the SALT model was “so social justice coded” that some of her students would disengage immediately. Others felt this model was not flushed out enough to apply in practice. Thus, despite recognizing the shortcomings of dominant leadership theories and tools, most participants continued to use them, often with modification. As participants reflected on their experiences with and beliefs about leadership knowledge, it became clear that white people as scholars, mentors, and leadership educators almost exclusively shaped leadership knowledge’s legitimacy, and thus, leadership practice.

Identity

Personal identity powerfully shaped participants’ legitimacy. Jackie shared extensively about how existing as a Black woman in leadership education challenged students’ and colleagues’ assumptions of her and her program. Jackie remarked, “I’m not the type of person who represents what leadership looks like.” Not only is Jackie the first Person of Color to hold a professional role in the program’s history, but she also recounted being encouraged by colleagues to call her predecessor, a white woman, when she suggested or implemented program changes in order to get her predecessor’s advice. In reflecting on this reality, Jackie shared, “I think that there is an expectation that if I don’t behave the way you would as a white person ... that my legitimacy is lowered.” Jackie was clear that she had extensive control and autonomy in her work, detailing several decisions and program changes she had instituted, and her narratives illustrated the ways race, gender, and anti-Blackness shape perceived leadership legitimacy, even among highly accomplished leadership educators.

In contrast, the two white men I spoke with reflected on the privilege their identities afforded. Specifically, Hiram remarked, “I can feel people waiting on me [to weigh in on decisions],” a feeling that has been confirmed by colleagues. Hiram shared that despite efforts to redistribute power amongst his team, mostly to the People of Color he supervises, he still

perceives that his colleagues, both those above and below him in the organization, wait for him to weigh in on decisions before proceeding. In short, white masculinity conferred power in professional spaces.

White women, who constitute both the majority of this study's participants and leadership educators, largely reflected on their white privilege. Interestingly, few white women leadership educators named gender as a challenge to their legitimacy. Maura was the only white woman who explicitly discussed gender. She felt that because she does not "identify with the warm emotive stereotypes of what women should be expected to do" that she sometimes struggled to navigate expectations of shared vulnerability in leadership work. Further, Ava, who identifies as queer and is a new leadership educator, shared about a time when students criticized a workshop she facilitated as just being "buzzwords," challenging her legitimacy. Ava remarked that "I don't think anyone ever views me as an expert" because of how she shows up in spaces. This student feedback led Ava to feel like she had to over-rely on theory and explicit connections to employability to appease students and to "legitimize our work" out of fear of receiving similar feedback from other students. Ava did not directly link this search for legitimacy to her gender, queerness, or age; rather, she explained that students' notions of legitimacy diverged from hers.

Identities as Assets

Given the increased focus on critical perspectives in leadership education work, participants, especially those with salient or visible marginalized identities, often framed their identities and lived experiences as assets in their practice. Two of the three queer or lesbian-identified white women participants spoke about how their identities, including their queerness, opened opportunities for relationship building and connection with students because of their willingness to share about their identities and experiences. Bernadette explained, "I think there's always students who connect with folks have a similar identity." Virginia similarly shared about the "value of students seeing other people in the world who may share some of [their identities]." They framed their queerness and lived experiences as assets to

their work. Other participants expressed similar sentiments.

Carol shared about teaching a session of a colleague's leadership course during a unit focused on social justice. In teaching, Carol provided personal examples of living with a disability. Later, students told Carol's colleague that "they thought it was helpful to hear that perspective, to have someone with my identities to be able to share." Participants remarked that sharing their own identities and experiences facilitated more authentic connections with students with minoritized identities and helped privileged students learn.

White participants believed that sharing their own experiences grappling with their privilege served as assets in their work. Belle commented:

I feel like I try to use my own experiences, my own mistakes, as stories or sharing so that students can see us as role models, build trust, break down walls and for students to maybe see themselves in those own experiences.

Rebecca and Erica, both white women, also saw the value in educating privileged students. However, Erica explained that teaching social justice as a white person is complicated, and at times she has perceived pushback from students with minoritized identities around her teaching and facilitation. Rebecca also recounted frustrations Students of Color expressed about the surface level nature of a workshop's social justice education. However, Rebecca also explained that she recognizes that many of her white colleagues and students perceive her racially minoritized colleagues as having an agenda in their work and turn to Rebecca as the "safe option." While this reality made her uncomfortable, she also felt responsible for using her privilege to continue to center social justice in her work and relationships.

Racial Diversity

Participants recognized the value of racial diversity among leadership education professionals and student staff. Belle confirmed this reality. She used to be one of four white women in the leadership office. Now a Black woman leads the office, and Belle is the

only white person in the office. Given these staffing shifts, her office's programming has increasingly centered on Women of Color and activism. According to Belle, students have positively responded, and she has noticed more Students of Color engaging in their programs. I asked Belle if she thought students would have responded as positively if all white women had still staffed her office. She responded quickly, "Oooh. No. I don't think so." Belle then explained how progressive students and Students of Color see their current leadership efforts as more sincere, whereas white people doing the same programs would seem like they were paying lip service to the institution's purported commitments to diversity while continuing to enroll a minuscule number of Black students.

Despite the value and necessity of increased racial diversity, some participants experienced tokenization. Carol explained she was invited to help facilitate the leadership program's social justice retreat because "they needed representation of identities." Focusing more on the value of Carol's identities than her expertise also led white leadership staff to tap her for her current role. While Carol appreciated their honesty, she was disappointed and was left carrying a responsibility to effect change. In this sense, belonging in leadership spaces was often controlled by white educators and white organizations.

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry sought to address two questions: 1) What legitimization processes do leadership educators negotiate in their work? and 2) How are such legitimization processes racialized? Participants discussed legitimization in terms of their experiences, knowledge, and identities, including professional experiences that aligned with or increased leadership knowledge and theory conferred leadership legitimacy. The value of existing leadership knowledge was validated by mentors and experiences with leadership scholars, many of whom are white. Finally, participants' social identities powerfully shaped their perceived legitimacy, as participants with minoritized identities both experienced challenges to their expertise and utilized their lived experiences

as sources of knowledge and connection with students. Both Women of Color recounted tokenizing experiences, anti-Blackness, and de-legitimation in their roles, despite their extensive professional experiences and expertise. These legitimization processes have powerful, racialized effects on student leadership development and leadership educators' lives. In short, participants' experiences illuminate racialized legitimization processes that largely empowered and legitimated white people and leadership knowledge produced by white scholars.

Research on leadership education practice aligns with many of the theories, tools, and practices leadership educators reported employing in their work (Owen, 2012), and this study's findings remind us how these tools are racialized. Although leadership education literature increasingly calls for centering critical and social justice approaches (Beatty et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2019; Dugan, 2017), this inquiry details whether and how leadership educators pursue these goals. This inquiry demonstrates that leadership educators' socialization, primarily to racism-evasive leadership knowledge by mostly white leadership scholars, shapes what theories, tools, and practices constitute leadership education work, and thus, who belongs in leadership spaces. Effectively, leadership legitimacy functions as a property of whiteness.

Whiteness in Leadership Education

As Rocco and Pelletier (2019) discussed, the leadership educator community's close-knit nature means that white leadership educators are connected to and often rely on overwhelmingly white professional networks. These networks structure opportunities for entry to and validation as student affairs leadership educators (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Even as mostly white leadership educators and leadership offices seek to diversify and expand who is represented, white people and institutions still mostly control these processes. Ray (2019) refers to whiteness as a credential in racialized organizations. Given that most leadership educators do not hold formal degrees in leadership, whiteness also operates as a credential

in leadership education spaces, where white people often hold the power to confer legitimacy and are perceived with greater legitimacy.

Although leadership educators, including this study's white participants, appear increasingly aware of race and racism, the work of addressing racism in practice often falls back on People of Color as students and leadership educators. The mostly white leadership office at Carol's institution tapped her to increase their staff's diversity. Carol felt an increased responsibility to initiate and lead social justice efforts. Other participants echoed the importance of student and staff diversity. The problem is not in diversity itself, but that People of Color are valued for what they represent, rather than their experiences, knowledge, and humanity (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019). There is a need to grapple with this tension by valuing representation and the humanity of People of Color and acknowledging that People of Color are often made responsible for social justice work without the appropriate support, recognition, and compensation.

Leadership Tools and Programs

Participants continued to mostly use the same tools, despite increased knowledge about the tools' shortcomings. Participants discussed making space for students to poke holes, critique, and deconstruct tools and theories. Although leadership educators also tried to engage in and role model these practices, white knowledge remained at the center. Virginia astutely wondered, "[W]hat does that mean for who gets to be the 'good' knowledge and who [does the poking of the holes]?" By not "throw[ing] the baby out with the bathwater," participants preserved whiteness's foundation and incorporated some critical theories and perspectives into their practices.

Student leadership education is more than a collection of programs, theories, and tools. Leadership educators connect tools, experience, and knowledge in practice. Although research has focused on leadership educators' experiences and their professional identity development (Priest & Seemiller, 2018; Seemiller & Priest, 2015, 2017), this literature has not critically explored how racialization

and/or legitimation shapes leadership educators' practices. Research on leadership educators, including this study, indicates leadership educators draw on their lived experiences, subjectivities, and identities in their work (Priest & Seemiller, 2018). For white educators, whiteness is complicated. Some recognized their white privilege and sought to use it as a way to engage other white people in social justice learning and practice, but many also positioned their whiteness as a challenge in social justice work.

Conversely, leadership educators with multiple marginalized identities both contended with multiple forms of oppression and used their subjectivities as assets in leadership practice. The importance of lived experience represents a tension because of whiteness's power. White people need to invest in significant (un)learning around whiteness to decenter and act against whiteness. All the while, whiteness continues to devalue the experiences and subjectivities of Women of Color and other leadership educators with multiple marginalized identities. Thus, whiteness persists as a significant barrier to equity.

Future Directions

As it stands, student affairs leadership education sits at a place of tension and contestation. This study illuminated how white people, particularly white women, played gatekeeping roles as colleagues, mentors, and knowledge creators. White people largely shaped the resources leadership educators used, the contours of leadership programs, and participants' belonging in leadership spaces. These realities mirror whiteness as property; in some ways, leadership legitimacy functions as a property of whiteness within exemplary student affairs leadership programs. Additionally, white knowledge and people's dominance aligns with legitimacy scholarship that exposes how racialization shapes graduate student socialization (e.g., Gildersleeve et al., 2011), research practices (e.g., Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), and faculty legitimacy (e.g., Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gonzales, 2013), reproducing white knowers and knowledge as legitimate. Higher education and leadership education must actively center and

pursue equity. Failing to do so furthers exclusion and marginalization against People of Color.

Leadership educators and leadership education should not seek to assimilate non-white scholars, leaders, and leadership knowledge into existing best practices and structures. Instead, leadership education can capitalize on the socially constructed nature of leadership, racialization, and legitimation to reconstruct norms. Similarly, Owen (2020) grappled with whether leadership should seek to degender or regender leadership. I argue the goal is not to de-racialize leadership, as such efforts would likely reproduce color-evasive practices and reaffirm whiteness as universal. In recognizing the racialized realities of leadership knowledge and legitimacy, leadership education can validate and expand notions of leadership and leadership legitimacy. Focusing on expansion, rather than assimilation, values the agency, contributions, and subjectivities of minoritized leaders.

Future research can explore how leadership educators, within and beyond student affairs leadership programs, negotiate and challenge dominant notions of leaders and leadership. A similar study could examine leadership educators in disciplinary leadership programs. Although these leadership educators may use different theories and have different professional paths, it is important to consider how whiteness is challenged and/or preserved. Further, research should center leadership educators at minority serving institutions (e.g., historically Black colleges and universities) and in identity-based centers (e.g., Black student unions; multicultural centers) and consider how they construct leadership education. Existing leadership tools and best practices should be critically examined to uncover and disrupt how these texts and tools racialize leadership; discourse analysis provides one avenue. Identifying leadership tools' ideological and discursive moves can help leadership educators challenge whiteness.

Finally, I urge leadership scholars and educators to go beyond the narrow, white canon of college student leadership development scholarship and practice. Museus and colleagues (2017) used the SCM as a starting point to articulate a leadership vision that is more centered on power, identity,

and justice. Dugan (2017) encouraged leadership education to take up Ospina and colleagues' (2012) strategic social change leadership. Finally, Owen (2020) centered intersectional feminist approaches. I encourage leadership educators to go even further by doing away with theories and tools that center whiteness and exploring new tools, possibilities, and theories, particularly by Black women and queer and trans Women of Color (e.g., Ella Baker, Charlene Carruthers). Practitioners can start by considering who has authored existing tools and whether social identities and power structures are explored. Often, dominant leadership theories neglect identity and power and present ostensibly universal models (Irwin & Posselt, 2020). The absence of explicit grappling with race, racism, and whiteness is often a glaring signal of a tool's normalized whiteness. White discourse's key feature is race-evasiveness (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2017). Leadership educators can start by engaging a healthy skepticism of their tools and employ deconstruction and reconstruction tools to explore how power and whiteness are (not) addressed (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019; Dugan, 2017).

Leadership education must also move beyond an overly dogmatic reliance on best practices to transform who represents leadership, leadership language, and valued ways of leading. Collective transformation can re-racialize leadership legitimacy in a way that disrupts leadership legitimacy as a property of whiteness. By intentionally centering leadership theorizing from People of Color and interrogating race, racism, and racialization, leadership education can expand what leadership forms are legitimated.

Conclusion

Leadership educators shape how leadership happens by providing formative leadership stories for many future leaders. As constituted through leadership theories and programs, these stories inform notions of what does and does not constitute leadership. Thus, there is a need to better understand how leadership educators themselves negotiate leadership legitimacy. Given whiteness' dominance in society and across higher education, the question

is not whether leadership education is implicated in perpetuating white supremacy, but rather how it is implicated. Legitimation and racialization processes shape leadership programs' structures and outcomes, informing what students are (de)legitimized as leaders. Future research and practice should continue to examine ways to resist and subvert whiteness's dominance while expanding notions of who and what are legitimated as leaders. To develop all students as leaders, leadership education programs must contend with whiteness.

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