Epiphany Related to Women and Leadership

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Introduction

This is a reflective essay regarding an epiphany related to women and leadership that I have experienced during the current academic year in the leadership studies Ph.D. program. The incident is described below followed by an analysis from the view of Black feminist thought and critical race theory. Following this analysis is a discussion regarding the impact of this epiphany on my development as a leader.

The Epiphany

As I began the fall semester for the current academic year, knowing that eventually I would write a dissertation for the Ph.D. program, I conducted a search for dissertations to review. My intention was to obtain a better understanding of the final product that I would produce for the effort I had embarked upon. The search returned dissertations on topics such as servant leadership, the effectiveness of managerial leadership development, transformational leadership behaviors, Black males in leadership, and ultimately Black females in leadership. I eventually read a dissertation involving barriers encountered by Black women executives (Cain, 2015). This dissertation leveraged a snowball sampling technique for recruiting participants and was conducted as a phenomenological study. Creswell (2014) describes phenomenological research as "a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (p.14). Snowball sampling is when participants in a study are asked to assist in identifying additional participants (www.boisestate.edu). Thus, my initial perception centered around a group of people who recommended each other, therefore more than likely all with a similar perspective, discussing a matter that they found unacceptable in some way.

With a background in math and computer science where virtually everything can be proved and programmed with formulas and codes that return the same results time and time again, the idea that a person's perspectives would be the foundation for truth was not in my universe of valid possibilities. I did not accept this approach as valid because this approach facilitated a *truth* that I believed could vary, given the person. Perhaps their perspective, what they felt, but not necessarily valid truth that stood on a solid foundation in the same way for all persons. Moreover, the fact that additional participants were identified by existing participants in the study, i.e. what I imagined to be likeminded people, did not lend credibility to my line of thinking. I may have countered that just because likeminded people from similar areas with similar backgrounds may argue two plus two equals five does not validate five as the correct answer.

To my surprise, for some reason the dissertation grabbed me. I read another phenomenological study regarding the development of Black women executives in academia and business (Davis, 2012). A similar experience occurred. I was intrigued, though I was not exactly sure why. I still doubted the foundation the study stood on – a phenomenological study of lived experiences. Not the rock solid foundation of math that I more easily accepted. I could *rationalize* away everything they said in the phenomenological study, or at least I rationalized I could. Eventually, I read a third phenomenological study regarding the influences of race and gender on the leadership of Black female principals of predominantly White elementary schools (Carter, 2013). I do not recall now exactly when I realized I was having a change of heart, but eventually by the third dissertation the epiphany happened. I finally *got it*. This was their experiences, i.e. the women in the studies, their reality; and no matter how much I may find validity to argue otherwise, much of that validity came from my experiences and my reality, not

theirs. I eventually came to the realization that two people can live in the same world but because of facts and variables that neither have any control over, their perspectives, their reality, can be 180 degrees opposite and both valid at the same time. Thus, I finally accepted that this validity stood on a foundation as solid as the proofs I once studied in math. Moreover, I found Black women, in particular, repeatedly discussing bias, prejudice, oppression, racism, and other negatives that they perceived - this was not my experience as a White male. I could not relate to these experiences as truths. However, I finally understood that this was their experience, their reality, and whether I ascribed to that reality or not, their reality was real for them, their everyday world. If I wanted to understand, wanted to make a difference, then I would have to go to them open-minded enough to have a chance at some understanding of their world.

Analysis

Black feminist thought provides Black women a platform to speak from regarding experiences unknown to other oppressed groups, resulting from the intersectionality of race and gender (Collins, 2000) – that is, of being both Black and female. Critical race theory encompasses the movement to study, understand, and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power; leveraging a traditional civil rights and legal perspective (Brown & Jackson, 2013) coupled with a broader consideration of "economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). The phenomenological studies articulated experiences of Black women using storytelling and counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, 2013) to convey a marginalization that is unique to the Black woman in regards to power, growth, development, and opportunity as compared to others, including other women (Davis, 2012). Black feminist thought seeks to capture the Black woman's lived experiences from the Black woman's reality (Collins, 2000),

and this perspective was the foundation for the epiphany I experienced. Building upon that foundation was the historical context of speaking to the fact that for all the gains America has experienced, factions fight against those gains (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013), and perhaps do so from conscious as well as unconscious considerations of group- and self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In both regards, a phenomenological study seeks to capture the phenomenon from the lived experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the concepts of Black feminist thought and critical race theory provide the framework to view and better understand the phenomenon.

Implications for My Development as a Leader

In addressing an IT (information technology) application issue, to ensure a proposed solution addresses the entire problem, one has to look into the matter and understand the root cause. At times the root cause is rather simple and obvious. At other times the root cause necessitates one to dig deep requiring a great deal of time and effort. In either case, test scenarios can be created that validate the proposed solution satisfies the issue, and just as importantly validate that the proposed solution does not cause unintentional issues of its own.

To address human and social issues in the same manner as IT application issues, one may find they too have to dig deep and understand the root causes. The social sciences have attempted to do this for centuries, i.e. dig deep where necessary to understand the root causes of our largest challenges. Newcomers to the social sciences can spend a lifetime trying to entirely grasp the matters of human dilemmas. While there is a place for this work, to deal with the current day, I posit I do not have to spend a lifetime addressing the matter. Yes, learning all the knowledge that one can is an admirable effort, and I surely would not discourage anyone from attempting to do so. Furthermore, I anticipate I will learn more myself. But in order to make a

more immediate and positive difference, I imagine I can simply meet and understand the matter where it is today. Though I have some knowledge of the facts of the past, I do not have to fully know and understand every facet of the past to recognize the adverse effects of today's bias, prejudice, oppression, racism, and other negatives that unfortunately are not concepts of the distant past but rather reality permeating the day-to-day activities of Black women in America (Collins, 2000).

In accepting a person's lived experience as valid, I have already found an impact on my development as a leader. In my organization, today I am much more willing to consider factors as being valid causes of challenges that at one time I would have simply suggested the persons involved just needed to *get over it*. Previously I could more quickly say that the world is not always fair. I may have gone on to add that the world not being fair is a simple fact of life that we all have to deal with. However, today I can better accept that perhaps she is really having a bad day and can't focus because the Black man gunned down in Indiana felt more like a brother being killed, or perhaps her father being killed, than just another terrible event that happens in a world of terrible events. There have been those times in my life where at 11:36 someone was alive and at 11:37 that same person was suddenly and unexpectedly dead, and my world would be changed to never be the same again. I did not get over that in a matter of minutes, nor hours, nor days. This is just one example of how someone's lived experiences affects how they see the world, and their perspectives are as valid as any. Thus, I finally realized how one can lack true understanding of another person until one embraces the person, spends time with the person, and feels comfortable with the person as if they were family, or possibly themselves. By extension I finally realized how one can lack true understanding of another community until one embraces

the community, spends time with the community, and feels comfortable navigating the community as if the community was their own.

Thus the epiphany - the other person's lived experience, whether a woman, whether a man, regardless of race, gender, or other distinguishing factors that make us unique - our lived experiences make us who we are and give our reality a solid foundation to stand on. I did not truly understand this fact until I embarked on a Ph.D. effort in which I found myself reading phenomenological dissertations written by Black women about the experiences of Black women in a framework of Black feminist thought, critical race theory, and the like. If I want to have a chance to understand and have an opportunity to make a difference, I have to go to where that person is today, go to that woman seeking leadership, and not expect her to come to me, not expect her to come to my world. Focusing on and accepting as valid where she is today, regardless of how she arrived at that point, and the validity of her perspectives, regardless of others who have different lived experiences, is the key to finding real solutions to real opportunities for the woman and leadership, whether her specifically or leadership in general for anyone.

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