Redressing leadership inequality-generating practices across differences: Conceptualising 'relational intersectionality'

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Abstract

This paper brings together and extends relational leadership theory and critical diversity theory to theorise leadership diversity as practices of 'relational intersectionality'. This approach contests the exclusionary ideologies on which dominant notions of leadership are based. Considering leadership thought and practice in relation to intersectionality and relationality, rather than individual's experiences of diversity, disrupts the reproduction of inequality regimes that exist in leadership practices With the concept of 'relational intersectionality' we explore how 'leaders' and 'followers' can relate across and between hierarchical boundaries and various types of differences. Ontological and practice-based disruptions hold the potential to redress persistent inequalities in leadership thought and practice.

Leadership, Diversity and Injustice

The promotion of leadership practices that facilitate and represent greater inclusiveness of cultural, gender and other forms of diversity have become the norm in contemporary organizations This focus on issues of diversity is exciting because points to the possibility of a society-wide adoption of egalitarian and equitable practices. Nevertheless, empirical evidence reveals that despite increasing demographic changes and diversity in Western countries, such as the US, the UK, Western Europe and Australia, leadership positions in the government and industry remain predominantly occupied by White men (Acker, 2006a; Cook & Glass, 2014; Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2019).

It appears that the increased focus on diversity is somewhat superficial, at least in its effect, highlighting that the mainstreaming of 'diversity' has elided a deep engagement with the issue of equal opportunity and representation in the workplace. What this also shows is that unfair and undermining structures, practices and interactions between leaders and followers largely remain the default mode of operation. This means that, as in wider society, social inequality based on legitimised forms of difference, such as inter alia gender, cultural background, religion, ability and age, continues to underpin how we relate to each other in the workplace and how we lead and manage the workforce (Acker, 2006b; 2011).

Although the lack of diversity and representation of the changing population in leadership positions is commonly acknowledged, approaches to both understanding and dealing with this issue have failed. This failure arises in part from academic theories and models that inform leadership training, education and practice being dominated by masculine and Western stereotypes of leaders (O'Leary et al., 2014). Moreover, the focus of these theories on individuals' experiences of diversity falls short of accounting for the structural factors that preclude people of diverse backgrounds attaining leadership positions (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2019). Ultimately, neither theory or practice has adequately challenged the capitalist foundation of organisations that relies on and justifies power differences in the workplace along gendered (Acker, 2006a) and racialized lines (Ray, 2019).

Research that has challenged this foundation has criticized the use of diversity and gender as inequality-generating categories as they are used by various groups to establish "socially negotiated boundaries and changing relations across those boundaries" (Tilly, 2001, p. 363). Further, researchers have turned to intersectionality and relational leadership as a way of addressing issues of oppressive structures and redressing power differentials (Pullen, Rhodes, McEwen and Liu, 2019). Despite these critical approaches, the same trend of co-optation of diversity into agendas not primarily concerned with the present violations of social justice is appearing. This has been especially the case in relation to the concept of intersectionality, resulting in, for example, the "dilution and flattening of the idea and the ideograph, makes the Black woman, 'other' disappear and sidelines the analysis of structural inequality" (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 4). The danger is that the mainstreaming of diversity has led to the depoliticising of difference and the

neutralising of others (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Kaasila-Pakanen, 2015). This neutralisation shifts attention away from the oppressive cultural systems, so as to lay the risk and responsibility of overcoming disadvantage on those who experience it (c.f. Piketty, 2013; Rose, 1996; Stoesz, 2017). This devolution of the management of social risk to those communities that experience these risks or those same individuals that experience disadvantage perpetuates, if not increases.

Inequality and discrimination, for example based on gender and race, form one of the most persistent forms of social injustice. This beholds leadership theorists to better understand this situation in order to develop practices that can counter entrenched epistemic racism and sexism and other forms of identity-based injustices. Theories and approaches to leadership that move beyond the normalisation of masculinity and other dominant Western management practices are required to address the complex gendered and cultural realities of workplace interaction, to approach diversity without recourse to simple stereotypes, and to locate leadership in the complex experiential interaction of the multiplicity of differences.

To develop leadership practices and theories that reflect the diverse workforce and go beyond the effective management of people in workplaces, there is a need for robust critique of what is considered the norm in terms of status (e.g. social hierarchies and social constructs of difference), control (e.g. rules, contracts and policies), and opportunity and fairness (e.g. meritocracy and access, participation and income distribution) (Scanlon, 2018). There is also a need for a more politicised approach to leadership. Such a political approach to theorising is a vital ingredient for the pursuit of social justice, freedom and equal opportunity at work, the development of which we contribute to in this paper.

Relational intersectionality: Politicising leadership

To examine this nexus between 'leaders' and 'followers' we see great promise in bringing together intersectional theory with relational leadership (cf. Uhl-Bien, M. (2006). Relational and intersectional approaches to studying leadership have been recognised as valuable in challenging issues of inequality in organisations (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2015). In this paper, the concept of 'relational intersectionality' is proposed as shift away from a concern for individualised identity politics, towards a

focus on how systems and structures come into play in the relational practice of leadership so as to exploit people who embody particular aspects of diversity. Integrating relational leadership and intersectionality into a politically informed theoretical framework enables rigorous analysis of the dynamic, granular processes of interaction between diverse organisational members. This integration in the form of 'relational intersectionality' can serve to examine how leadership emerges through the ongoing and iterative relational processes between people, where these processes are not only interpersonal, but also shaped by the contextually relevant dynamics of power embedded in and between their intersectional identities.

It is important to note that in bringing 'relationality' and 'intersectionality' together, we are not interested in furthering the cross-fertilisation of intersectionality and social identity theory (Powell et al., 2015). With the concept of relational intersectionality, we should be clear that we are not arguing that intersectionality is fluidly defined in the moment of interaction with others, pointing to notions of salience explored by proponents of social identity theory. This would run counter to the idea at the heart of intersectionality: that gender, race and other non-dominant socio-cultural elements linked to various discriminatory systems have a cumulative and non-dividable effect of oppression. Moreover, combining relationality and intersectionality is not simply about examining particular relationships; it is about investigating how we can advance the equality agenda in theory and practice whilst living together in socio-organisational worlds marked by discrimination and inequity.

Developing leadership theory and practice that fully incorporates the possibilities of inclusion and the harsh realities of inequality and oppression requires an approach that attends to the structures that inform complex interactional processes between leaders and other organisational members. Alos required is an ideological shift beyond entrenched stereotypes of what it means to be a 'leader'. Applying 'relational intersectionality' to leadership takes steps towards this. A relational perspective recognises that diversity and intersectionality cannot simply be regarded as a set of identity categories (e.g., female, Black, middle-class, etc.) that are attached to a particular person, as if their very being could be located at the centre of a Venn diagram. Intersectionality is itself socially constructed in the context of embedded relationships, and will manifest across, and not just within, individuals (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

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In an organisational context, an appreciation of intersectionality is not just as a characteristic of either 'leaders' or 'followers', but as something that becomes manifest in their relationship as it is culturally and socially structured. Furthermore, considering the identity position of only one party in a leadership relationship is simply not adequate to understand potential or actual discrimination. What is required here is an appreciation of how the identities of both parties are negotiated, how their differences interact in specific contexts and situations, and how that interaction embodies the relationship between individual agencies and collective structures. Investigating leadership through relational intersectionality thus enables an appreciation of the ways that leader-follower relations are enacted and can be negotiated across and between multiple axes of difference. Understanding the meanings that organisational members ascribe to these relations can enable an assessment of how relational intersectionality plays out through, and informs the experience of, leadership relations and the inequality regimes they so often reproduce.

Theorising leadership in terms of relational intersectionality also serves to embrace the radical politics surrounding the debates on intersectionality (Pullen, Rhodes, McEwen and Liu, 2019). In this way, we can account for the ways in which the socio-political context of intersectionality is a condition of our ability to connect with others; and make visible people's explicit and latent interests and motivations in engaging or not in these relationships. This, of course, necessitates acknowledging the political character of leadership. Such framing requires not only an epistemology that seeks to know how intersectionality works in favour of some and against the interests of others, but also an ontology that brings into question who we are and the shape of our relationship with others. It is with such an ontological focus that we can imagine real changes where inequality regimes are capable of being transformed by transforming the relationships of the people enacting them.

Topolski's (2015) theorising about 'relationality' provides useful grounds to understand how this can be achieved. Topolski (2015, p.205) defines relationality as a transformative encounter that:

> forces us to confront ourselves and calls for a rather difficult reflection
>
> upon our narrative identity, the place it creates for alterity, forcing us to

> question the grounds upon which we fear the other; it can equally create
> a space, from within, for difference.

Examining leadership in the context of a politics of relationality helps us rethink the terms and practices surrounding inclusion/exclusion, leader/follower, self/other, structure/agency, perpetrators/victims. The politics of relationality provides the means to disrupt systemic institutionalised inequality regimes that mark and write us in particular ways that are too often beyond our control. It challenges us to see leadership as an encounter between people of difference, where we respect and are committed to turning to the other because we are bound to the other. In essence, this calls for the need to be "aware and understand that the relationship to the other is constitutive of the world and the self" (Topoloski, 2015, p.206) and, thus, to take responsibility for our actions or how we relate to others. Politics in this vein promises an affirmative basis for a revitalised solidarity because it requires leadership not only relate to the other, but also to embody the other (Topolski, 2015; Vachhani & Pullen, 2018).

Achieving equality in singular workplaces is only part of the emancipatory struggle given that addressing violations or inequalities at an individual organisational level does not necessarily lead to broader systemic changes. In some instances, an individual focus might have the opposite effect and make particular people appear or feel more isolated, and, in so doing, provide a normative platform for oppressive behaviour in institutions that reinforce patriarchal domination through structural order. Exposing how inequality is located between social and community structures and the agencies of the individuals involved (Boogard & Roggeband, 2010) is necessary. Powerful popular feminist resistance exemplified and fuelled by social movements, such as #MeToo, #ShoutingBack and Black Lives Matter, can be seen as examples of this emerging at this particular historical juncture.

For leadership to be a part of redressing and disrupting the mechanisms and processes that render some of us insignificant across axes of difference, our understanding of relational leadership extends beyond that of the relations between two independent people capable of relating in action to each other. Through this engagement, we are required to take responsibility for all our actions in creating a shared practice or 'community'. Relational intersectional leadership accepts that the self-other relations in

leadership are formed through the social and community relations in which individual relationships are located, registering the vibrancy and rigour of the social collective and each of its members. Such politically oriented practice holds the potential to transform dyadic leadership relations characterised by productive and restrictive power-based interactions, into both affirmative and ethically informed relations.

Conclusion

Leadership is a central practice that contributes to institutionalised inequality and, as such, a location where political interventions can be implemented to redress these inequalities. For this reason, critical leadership and critical diversity scholars have been calling for new and innovative ways to conceptualise and practise leadership in an increasingly diverse, multicultural society (Ahonen et al, 2014). Our paper is one response to this call. To disrupt leadership theories and practices associated with middle-class White men, we have proposed the term 'relational intersectionality'. This concept helps us register the complex intersections of difference that shape how leadership practices and organisational structures are developed and enacted to exploit one group of people in favour of another.

Bringing intersectionality together with relational leadership to understand the operation of inequality regimes enables the examination of how specific relationships, and the structures in which they are embedded, are enacted through leadership. Using relational intersectionality as a centre point of leadership theory specifically accounts for, and provide a means to confront, inequality regimes perpetuated by leadership practice. In this context, leadership is conceived in connection with an equality-based organisational politics, by reconsidering how we understand the political character of leadership relations in organisational settings where difference proliferates through relations with others (cf. Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

The notion of 'relational intersectionality' is no panacea for the intersectional justice perpetuated by leadership as it is both institutionalised and practiced. What it does suggest, however, is that attention be placed on the ways in which structural inequalities emerges in and through relationships, as well as how they can be challenged through those same relationships. Addressing inequality in a manner that acknowledges the

complexities of intersectional systems of difference at institutional, interactional and individual levels is needed more than ever, and it is by changing relationships that mediate and perpetuate inequality that change can be brought about. This serves to politicise leadership in a way that enables a revitalised project of solidarity in the fight against inequality.

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