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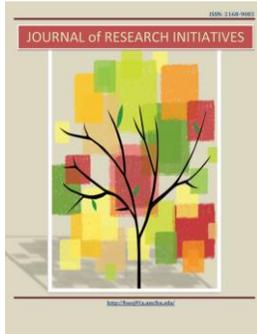
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LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND UNITED STATES DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS: RESPONSIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

As the United States becomes increasingly more diverse, it is imperative that organizations consider the implications of their leadership pipeline. Given the differences that can exist by social identity groups in experiences, values, interests, and communications, it raises a question about the responsiveness of current leadership theories to the changing demographics. This article explores the responsiveness of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory to the demographic changes as a means of helping organizations consider how existing leadership norms and theories need to be expanded to encompass the future population of leaders across race, sex, and age.

Keywords: Leadership Theories, Demographics, Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange Theory, Race, Age, Sex

Introduction

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, projections show that the U.S. labor force is expected to become increasingly more diverse from 2016 to 2026 (Lacey, Toossi, Dubina, & Gensler, 2017). Whether its age demographics, race or sex (biological classifications) shifts in the labor force, research conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Pew Research Center shows definitive trends in the workplace which creates questions regarding the implications to leadership. According to a study conducted by Zenger, Folkman, and Edinger (2010), poor leaders can lose money for an organization while extraordinary leaders can more than double profits. Given the importance of leaders to the performance of a company, the research to understand what makes good leaders has been the foundation of many research studies, evolving into the development of leadership theories. According to the Center for Values-Driven Leadership (2017), the latest research on leadership theory has shifted from the study of traits to the study of behaviors, migrating from a focus on who the leader is to what the leader does and considers the perspective of followers. Allen (2011) shares that demographic changes "can affect communication processes because members of each age cohort or group tend to have differing experiences, values, and interests" (p. 5). Allen (2011) also states that

individuals learn communication styles and rules based on group memberships and how they have been socialized, affecting "how, when, why, and whether or not we communicate" (p. 16).

Recognizing the differences in experiences, values, interests, and communications that can exist by social identity group, understanding whether key leadership theories offer a current framework that is responsive to demographic groups is important as the U.S. faces changing demographics. This article explores the responsiveness of three leadership theories: transformational, authentic, and leader-member exchange (LMX) theories, recognizing that there is a myriad of theories that could be explored. Transformational leadership according to Northouse (2016) is one of the most commonly recognized theories, focusing on "charismatic and affective elements of leadership" (p. 161). Novicevic, Harvey, Buckley, and Brown-Radford (2006) cite a few different views on authentic leadership ranging from individual to organizational authenticity; however, Northouse (2016) summarizes this theory as one of the newest areas of research that emphasizes the authenticity of the leader. The LMX theory was selected for this article as it explores the unique perspective of leadership in terms of the interactions between followers and leaders, unlike many theories that focus on the leader (Northouse, 2016).

An Overview of U.S. Labor Force Demographic Projections

As the U.S. labor force becomes increasingly more diverse, the leadership pipeline will find an increased need to leverage a diverse population. Labor rate projections show continuing growth in age, sex (biological classifications), and race (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In an article by Makino and Oliver (2019), the researchers found that a lack of professional parity in organizations by gender and ethnicity inhibited the "thought diversity at the most strategic levels of an institution, in turn diminishing organization potential and effectiveness" (p.5). Recognizing the opportunity to leverage the changing demographics in the U.S. becomes not only the desired state but one that is imperative to achieving organizational success.

Demographics by Age

Allen (2011) explains that the U.S. is seeing four generations working together for the first time in history. The National Vital Statistics Report (2019) shared that the average life expectancy in the U.S. in 1967 was 70.5 years old compared to 78.6 in 2017. The increase in life expectancy has resulted in an increase in the number of people in the workplace at older ages. Labor participation rates for workers age 65 to 74 is expected to grow from 17.5% in 1996 to 30.2% in 2026 and from 4.7% to 10.8% for workers over age 75 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In addition to the increase in age in the workplace, there is also a shift in individuals holding leadership roles. In the past, leaders tended to be employees who progressed through the organizational hierarchy over time, resulting in leadership roles being held by more senior, older employees who were predominately white males (Allen, 2011). In today's environment, organizations are seeing younger employees with technical knowledge and skills that exceed their older counterparts. Consequently, the traditional hierarchy that existed is seeing

younger employees in leadership roles during a time that organizations are also flattening organization structures. The result is organizations with greater intergenerational workers.

Demographics by Sex (Biological Classifications)

For the purposes of this article, the sex biological classifications used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics of male/female and men/women are used to explore workplace labor participation and leadership theory implications. Using this definition creates alignment with labor rate data assessed. While this article is limited to the sex (biological classifications) used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is additional research opportunity to consider leadership theories within the context of broader biological classifications and gender constructs that address cultural and societal views definitions.

Several articles have been published on the projections for women in the U.S. labor force. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) anticipates a 5.8% increase in the U.S. labor force of women from 2014 to 2024, with the largest percentage coming from women aged 75 and older. In an article by Wilson and Jones (2018) of the Economic Policy Institute, the authors explained that more men have exited the labor market between 1979 and 2016, compared to an increase in women entering the market. Fry (2019) describes a U.S. labor force that now reports women accounting for 50.2% of the college-educated workforce, representing a rapid increase since 45.1% in 2000. In the 2017 Monthly Labor Review – Labor Force article, Lacey, Toossi, Dubina, and Gensler, the authors explained that the "labor force growth for men has been lagging that for women since 1996, and this trend is expected to continue over the 2016-2026 decade" (para. 3).

In a global survey of nearly 22,000 firms across 91 countries, researchers from the Peterson Institute for International Economics found data suggesting positive correlations between women in corporate leadership roles and organizational performance (Noland, Tyler, M., & Kotschwar, B., 2016). The findings assert that "the largest gains are for the proportion of female executives, followed by the proportion of female board members. This pattern underscores the importance of creating a pipeline of female managers and not simply getting lone women to the top." (Noland, et al., 2016, p. 3) With the rise of women in the workforce, understanding the implications of women as it relates to leadership theories is imperative.

Demographics by Race

The race terminology in this article uses language consistent with the current U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to reference social identity groups, recognizing that race terminology changes over time based on categorization labeling created by humans. Race is considered a social construction as described by Omi and Winant (2015), "It is a master category – a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped and continue to shape the history, policy, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (p. 106). Exploring race as a part of this article is critical given the social construction in the U.S. As Allen (2011) shared, "individuals tend to expect everyone to enact dominant norms and communication styles" (p. 83).

The 2017 Monthly Labor Review – Labor Force article describes "immigration as the main engine of population growth, resulting in high projections for labor force participation rates for Asian and Hispanic immigrants compared to the previous decade" (Lacey, Toossi, Dubina, and Gensler, 2017, para. 4). The Pew Research Center (Krogstad, 2019) showed that 109 counties in 22 states shifted from majority white to majority nonwhite in their review of the Census Bureau data. As shifts occur in the labor force, understanding whether common leadership theories are responsive to the social constructs of race becomes important.

The workplace demographics are undoubtedly changing in the U.S. This creates an increased need to ensure that leadership theories provide insight into leadership practices across different social identity groups to ensure individual and organizational success. Whether the social identity group differences are based on social or biological differences, the differences in experiences, values, interests, and communications drive a need to understand leadership from the different perspectives of the groups.

Responsiveness of Transformational, Authentic and Leader-Member Exchange Leadership Theories to Demographics

Northouse (2013) shared that leadership appeared as a concept in the early 1900s with a focus on control, power, and domination. As leadership theories evolved to create an understanding of how and why some people become leaders, definitions expanded to encompass group processes, personalities, acts, behaviors, skills, and relationships (Northouse, 2013). The demographic shifts in the United States, along with the fast-paced development of new technology, globalization, environmental and social issues and changes in the work environment, challenges current leadership theories in the 21st-century shift (Hickman, 2016). Northouse (2013) stated that theories could inform and provide direction on how leadership is practiced.

Traditionally, the concept of leadership has been related to power; however, power has also been linked to privilege which is encountered in multiple areas, including the leadership and management of the people in the workplace, the operations of organizations and institutions, and the study of current leadership theories (Ariss, Ozbilgin, Tatli, & April, 2014; Northouse, 2013). The exploration of three current leadership theories, including, transformational, authentic, and leadership member exchange (LMX), will reveal potential issues challenging scholars and practitioners to rethink what leadership looks like for the 21st century.

Transformational Leadership Responsiveness to Demographics

One of the current and most popular leadership approaches is transformational leadership. Coined in 1973 by James Downton and conceptualized in 1978 by political sociologist, James MacGregor Burns, transformational leadership is defined as the process of engagement with others and developing a connection which increases the morale and motivation with both the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2013). Yukl (1999) argued that the transformational leadership theory had been associated with the heroic-leadership stereotype which can be detrimental for emerging leaders in a changing world. Taking the dynamics and implications of

power, transformational leadership predominantly assumes leadership to be neutral for all demographics (Liu & Baker, 2016).

A major gap within the transformational leadership theory is the fact that the initial research subjects were limited to political leaders (Burns, 1978). McGregor (2014) describes Burns as a political scientist and historian who wrote biographies of presidents and the American political system. Given Burns' framework of the political system in American, the leaders studied in his research represented those with privilege and power. Northouse (2013) argued that transformational leaders advocate for change and use society's popular notion of what leadership looks like to describe the norm. The transformational leadership theory underpins the social construction of leadership by "implying that leadership is race neutral" and often excludes the cultural capital and skills that people of color, women, and other demographic possess, devaluing them as not being the standard of leadership (Liu & Baker, 2016, p. 421).

In a study conducted by Kent, Blair, Rudd, and Schuele (2010), researchers found that men and women displayed the same transformational leadership behaviors; however, there were differences in the extent to which men and women used the behavior of communicating meaning. Additionally, the researchers found that women rated other women lower on certain dimensions compared to their rating of men and men rated men and women leaders more consistently. Additionally, Okozi, Smith, Clark, and Sherman (2009) asserted that evidence suggests that ethnic minorities tend to adopt a nurturing, inclusive, dynamic, engaging and inspiring leadership style as demonstrated through transformational leadership. Likewise, Silva and Mendis (2017) found that women in their research tended to leverage a transformational leadership style more often than men to overcome perceptions of gender roles. Braun, Peus, and Frey (2018) explain that communal attributes of being helpful, kind, sensitive, and gentle are typically projected onto women and do not align to attributes typically associated with leaders or men, whereas traits such as being ambitious, dominant and independent are projected onto men. Consequently, women find the transformational leadership style more supportive in overcoming perceptions.

Rosinga and Jungmann (2015) shared that research reveals that a majority of "leaders become less charismatic, change oriented, and willing to take risks with increasing age" (p. 2). Interestingly, Rosinga and Jungmann (2015) also found research indicating a perception that older leaders are more effective and therefore, followers rate older leaders higher overall.

The research suggests that there are indeed differences in how transformational leadership is demonstrated and experienced in the workplace when considering the demographics of race, sex, and age. While the origins of transformational leadership did not encompass a diverse audience, expanded research on the theory reveals that it could be used effectively by different identity groups. Additional research is needed to further understand how transformational leadership behaviors present by different identity groups to value the strengths of each group.

Authentic Leadership Responsiveness to Demographics

Authentic leadership focuses on how genuine or real the leader is perceived, creating trust with their followers (Northouse, 2013). A central aspect to authentic leadership is "being true to one's self" (Nyberg, 2014, p. 438). Character traits demonstrated by authentic leaders are; (1) they understand their purpose, (2) they have strong values about the right thing to do, (3) they establish trusting relationships with others, (4) they demonstrate self-discipline and act on their values, and (5) they are passionate about their mission (Northouse, 2013).

Like transformational leadership, authentic leadership does not consider the racialized experiences leaders of color encounter when navigating the leadership pipeline. Northouse (2013) states that authentic leadership includes being aware of and trusting your feelings while having a deep sense of self-awareness. The ability of a leader to demonstrate self-awareness includes the ability for the individual to acknowledge the multiple levels of their identity, including sex, race, and age. Disregarding identities creates a situation where a leader is unable to be fully authentic and creates a circumstance where the followers are not comfortable acknowledging differences, which limits the ability for the organization to leverage the strengths of the differences. Social and cultural indicators attempt to suggest that Americans no longer view one's color as an issue (Gallagher, 2003). Disregarding race, particularly a leader of color, devalues who they are as an individual, and prevents their ability to lead authentically (Davis et al., 2015). Similarly, disregarding the sex and age of a leader is disingenuous and prevents the leader or followers from operating based on their multiple identities. Rosinksi (2013) shared that "people adapt to groups by choosing to express or repress emotions like joy, anger, humor, and sarcasm" (p. 21). Additionally, West and Turner (2018) explain that subordinated groups such as women in leadership roles may experience the effects of muted group theory where their voices are not heard amidst male-dominated roles. The adverse impacts of certain identity groups such as women and people of color in their efforts to give complete voice to their experiences as leaders limit their ability to be authentic. Liu, Cutcher, and Grant (2015) explain that "authenticity is something leaders 'do' rather than something they 'have' or 'are', and that being constructed as authentic depends on the leader performing authenticity in line with gender norms deemed appropriate for the socially constructed context in which they are expected to lead" (p. 1). As a result, authenticity is not welcoming to behaviors that are inconsistent with the norms, creating challenges for women and other non-dominant identity groups to function authentically as individuals.

Pinelli, Sease, Nola, Kyle, Heldenbrand, Penzak, and Ginsburg (2018) explain that "authentic leaders draw upon their experiences to drive their actions and make decisions, it is not possible for an authentic leader to bend to the whims of an individual cohort, such as millennials. Instead, authentic leaders lead from their own unwavering values and beliefs, which are based on experience" (p. 639). Given that "members of different age groups have different experiences, values, and interests which causes communication challenges" (Allen, p. 5), the ability for authentic leadership to adequately adjust to changing demographics is questionable. Additionally, the experiences of different identity groups in the U.S. varies, creating further gaps in the ability of leaders to rely solely on their personal experiences to succeed as a leader.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory Responsiveness to Demographics

The Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centered on the interactions between the leader and follower (Northouse, 2013). Further, the LMX theory recognizes how the interactions between the leader and follower can create in-groups and out-groups within the organization (Northouse, 2013). While there are benefits of being a part of the in-group, scholars must begin to ask, who are those who are a part of the in-group and who are the ones who are a part of the out-group? The LMX theory can cause indirect discrimination as being a part of the in-group can be perceived as a form of a social network, to which, social networks reinforce the superior ability of the majority-group and are often composed of mostly white males (Emerson & Yancey, 2011; Allen, 2011). Scholars have argued that the LMX theory validates the experiences people encounter within their respective organizations however, it is well documented that the experiences that people of color, women, and other diverse groups encounter within organizations, are often ignored (Northouse, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016; Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015; Alexander, 2010).

Like both transformational and authentic leadership, the LMX theory does not take into account the racialized experiences of leaders of color and could be considered the most problematic theory. Interactions between the leader and followers can create relationships with special privileges leading to in-group and out-groups (Northouse, 2013). As racism is deeply embedded within U.S. institutions, the LMX approach can resurface the "legacy of exclusion" for leaders of color (Higginbotham & Andersen, 2016, p. 177). Furthermore, the LMX theory can surface stereotypes by race, sex, and age, that further cultivate glass ceilings and "tense relationships with colleagues and supervisors" preventing them from advancing in the leadership pipeline (Wingfield, 2009, p. 172).

In a study conducted by Milner, Katz, Fisher, and Notrica (2007), researchers found that more positive leader-follower relationships existed when both the leader and the follower were male, or both were female. Collins, Burrus, and Meyer (2014) also found support for more positive relationships and job outcomes when the leader and the follower were women. According to Stephenson (2017), the LMX theory has the potential to support age diversity as the theory fosters a one-on-one relationship between the leader and the follower. While one-on-one relationships are at the core of the LMX theory, the concept of in-group and out-group membership can affect which individuals are placed in which roles. West and Turner (2018) describe the communication accommodation theory as a concept where individuals evaluate each other based on similarities and dissimilarities in communications, social status, group belonging, and alignment to the perceived norms. Individuals then choose to either accommodate one another in the interaction or resist the accommodation. Recognizing that pattern of behavior creates concerns for whether leaders and followers across differences can adapt and accommodate as easily as the same group memberships. As a result, the LMX theory raises questions regarding its effectiveness to value the differences that are occurring in the shifts in demographics in the U.S.

Conclusion

Rosinski (2013) explains that ignoring differences, recognizing them negatively, and minimizing the importance are common pitfalls that reinforce the belief that one's own experiences, culture, and views are the shared realities of others. The three explored leadership theories of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and leader-member exchange (LMX) offer significant contributions to the study of leadership; however, understanding how the experiences, cultures, and views affect the realities of various identity groups is needed to prepare for the changing demographics in the U.S. "As business, and our understanding of human nature, grows more complex, leadership theories and frameworks should evolve to accommodate the new contexts and understandings" (Center for Values-Driven Leadership, 2017). If extraordinary leaders can more than double the profits of an organization as shared by Zenger, Folkman, and Edinger (2010), leveraging the skills, talents, and leadership capabilities of all employees will become not only an option but a necessity for organizations to remain competitive in the marketplace.

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