

## **Teaching Multicultural Leadership Using a Social Constructionist Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Multicultural leadership education may be enhanced through the use of social construction literature as a theoretical frame. Here, I present a brief overview of social construction theory and demonstrate how its tenets overlap with the goal of encouraging students' intercultural competence. I then provide two classroom activities that illustrate how I have used social construction to explain and examine interaction across diverse groups, as well as student feedback regarding the activities' efficacy.

### **Introduction**

The reality of everyday life is shared with others... The reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended and 'dealt with' in face-to-face encounters (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 29, 30-31).

If leadership is a process involving collaboration with others toward a goal (Peck & Dickinson, 2009; Rost, 1991), then awareness of the "others" with whom leaders work is becoming increasingly important. Multicultural leadership education is integral as it develops the skills, values, and approaches necessary to interact with others (Karim, 2003). Mio (2003) argued that multicultural education has the potential to lessen students' naïveté toward groups they are unfamiliar with, improve the chances students will avoid unintentional bias, and encourage intellectual stimulation that promotes awareness.

However, teaching multicultural leadership to undergraduates has a unique set of challenges. Some students in a multicultural leadership classroom may be unaware of the effects their culture has on their worldviews or leadership practice (Goodman, 2001). Others may hold deep-seated animas toward particular groups that may prevent the development of effective leadership relationships (Bennett, 2004). Then there are students that may be aware of their own culture as well as others', but have not examined how the study of multicultural leadership can prevent inadvertent exclusion of others from leadership processes (Mio, 2003).

I submit that using social construction as a theoretical approach has pedagogical value in teaching multicultural leadership. First, I provide a brief overview of social construction theory, paying particular attention to how it has been employed in the study of leadership. Based on classroom experience and student feedback, I provide an overview of classroom activities that use a social construction framework to educate students on multicultural leadership issues. These activities demonstrate how multicultural leadership education may benefit from an application of social construction theory.

### **Literature Review: Social Construction and Leadership**

Prior literature within the field of leadership education has tended to focus on how social construction can be used to redefine or complicate the concept of leadership itself (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008). However, works such as these either do not discuss how cross-cultural leadership in particular could be strengthened through the application of social construction theory (Billsbery, 2009) or use social construction language without identifying it as such (Karim, 2003). A second body of literature has used social construction theory to help make sense of how cultural differences are interpreted (Seidman, 2004). This literature, though, is often more sociological or cultural in nature and does not extend its implications to leadership relationships or processes. Toward the end of providing a common understanding of the concept and its potential uses in leadership education, I begin by examining some foundational literature in the field. I then provide existing applications of the theoretical framework toward leadership, both in terms of theory and leadership education.

The social construction of reality is a body of theory that argues our world and our perception of it is largely shaped by social interaction (Gergen, 2009; Seidman, 2004). What is considered to be “real,” therefore, is the result of a social consensus regarding its “reality.” As Berger and Luckmann state:

The reality of everyday life further presents itself to me as an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others. This intersubjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious. I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continual interaction and communication with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 23).

Berger and Luckmann differentiate between objective and subjective realities. Although an objective reality may present itself in the form of a fact, subjective realities affect reactions to and interpretations of this information. These subjective realities come from and are continuously both reinforced and revised by socialization –interactions with others in society. Through constant engagement with others, people receive, interpret, and re-establish a “reality” through which they see the world. This, in turn, affects interactions with others.

In essence, the theory of social construction outlines how individuals have a particular lens through which they view the world, and how they interpret and react to what is viewed through this lens is contingent on society and culture. Language and experience (Butler, 2005;

Grint, 2005) are two key components of this socially constructed reality, which is consistently reinforced as the norm through continued immersion in said culture. Using social construction theory in teaching multicultural leadership provides a common vocabulary for students and educators to wrestle with concepts that are already largely discussed in the discipline.

Leadership scholarship has examined the utility of a social constructionist framework in examining leadership concepts (Ford et al., 2008; Peck & Dickinson, 2009). Specifically related to pedagogies, Billsberry (2009) demonstrated that employing a social constructionist framework to engage in leadership education can be beneficial, encouraging students to think critically about how leadership is defined – both culturally and personally. Using a class project and various films, Billsberry examined how she and her students explore contemporary views of leadership as compared to historical ones. Grint (2005) used case studies from American diplomatic history to illustrate how public perception and leaders' behaviors interact to create both an outcome and a context that facilitates the realization a particular reality that is favorable to its architects. For instance, because the American public widely believed that there were weapons of mass destruction present in Iraq, political elites were able to orchestrate an invasion of the country with significant popular support – despite the fact that such weapons did not exist. Leaders, therefore, can take advantage of the socially constructed reality to influence how they are perceived and how they can meet their ends.

Although the language of social construction is not new to leadership scholarship, I note there has been little work synthesizing social construction theory with issues of teaching multicultural leadership. Karim (2003, p. 34), writing on the importance of exposing students to the theory and practice behind multicultural leadership, stated that “social and cultural realities... collide daily in our businesses ...institutions, and communities.” Karim channeled much of the same language and many of the same ideas from social construction theory, although he did not refer to it by name. Further, he also did not provide a practical blueprint for accomplishing this task in the classroom. Likewise, Billsberry (2009) and Grint (2005) provided fascinating pedagogical techniques that incorporate social construction to complicate students' conceptualizations of leadership generally speaking, but there has been little application of this body of theory to teaching cross-cultural leadership.

### **Using Social Construction Theory in the Classroom**

I believe that multicultural leadership scholarship and education can be enhanced by both employing the language of social construction explicitly and exposing students to in-class learning opportunities that reinforce these concepts. Leadership scholars are already examining the ramifications of social construction on our conceptualizations of the term leadership, as well as on our interpersonal relationships. Multicultural interaction and social justice education texts speak to ideas about cultural realities and the reinforcement of norms that lead to disadvantage and interpersonal barriers. I maintain that combining both these strains of literature under the umbrella of social construction provides leadership educators a new way of helping students to make meaning of multicultural leadership in a new way that enhances students' understanding of the importance of inclusion in developing relationships.

During the autumn 2012 term, I experimented with using a social constructionist framework in teaching my institution's multicultural leadership course. The course had one learning objective: "Students will understand the impact of cultural identity, life experiences and world views on leadership relationships as it relates to privilege and inclusion." In short, the goal of the course was to prompt students to consider themselves as citizens of a diverse world who will have to interact with others different from them in the context of leadership relationships. Students were challenged to confront biases that may present obstacles toward interacting meaningfully with others and to develop strategies that they might do so in their everyday lives. In terms of structure, I began the course by providing some theoretical scaffolding of multicultural leadership to make the case that considering how cultural differences in leadership relationships matters. The middle of the course asked students to consider how various social identities, such as race, socioeconomic class, or sexual identity, can have an effect on how they see the world – as well as on how others see them. The end of the course synthesized these multiple perspectives to challenge students to articulate how these concepts might manifest themselves in their lives and leadership trajectories beyond this singular class.

The course is taught at an institution in the Midwest whose undergraduate population is over 77 percent white; the next largest racial group is non-resident aliens at 7 percent, many of whom are enrolled in English language programs instead of mainstream undergraduate minors. Although social class backgrounds are varied, few students have traveled out of the country; a couple students in the course have admitted to never having left the state in their lives. Demographics of the course generally mirror those on campus. This means that many of the students in the multicultural leadership course come in having had little significant cross-cultural interaction.

It should be noted that the composition of both the campus and the course is relatively homogenous, which means that the techniques described here may be more applicable for groups that may be largely unaware of their own culture or of cultural difference (Goodman, 2001). Those who work with for more heterogeneous groups or students who are largely aware of their own culture and cross-cultural differences may have to adapt the activities for maximized student learning.

Here, I outline some of the methods I used to teach multicultural leadership using a social constructionist lens, as well as how students ascertained the educational value of these experiences through their coursework and feedback. Early in the course, I asked students to read parts of Berger and Luckmann's (1969) *The Social Construction of Reality*. I then linked Berger and Luckmann's theory to several in-class experiences and activities. The goal was to use this theory can contribute to a shared understanding of what multicultural leadership is and how it can be practiced. Below, I analyze these activities, their link to social construction, and their efficacy in terms of contributing to student learning on issues of multicultural leadership as defined by the course learning objective.

### **"They're Coming!"**

Active learning approaches can permit students to instigate their own commitments to material through group work, simulations, or small discussions (Lowman, 1995). Because one

of the important tenets of both multicultural leadership and social construction holds that reality is subjective, differing across people and contexts, the first formal day of class employs an activity that illustrates these principles. Active learning and an intriguing premise helps students to understand some of the basic principles of multicultural communication, language interpretation, barriers to understanding, and social construction theory all before these concepts are formally introduced. Entitled “They’re Coming!”, I start the activity by telling students that we have discovered intelligent extraterrestrial life – a sophisticated spaceship is now in orbit around Earth (I adapted this activity from a similar one I witnessed facilitated by Dr. Ata Karim nearly a decade ago. At the time, he was a faculty member at Kansas State University). Despite multiple efforts at communication, there is no contact from the ship. The students are then tasked with trying to make first contact with the alien species by sending up three objects that represent the totality of human culture. Students are asked what message they wish to communicate to these new beings and how those objects might communicate that message.

Student groups come up with a wide array of objects they wish to send up. Many choose to send some form of technology, such as a laptop, either to communicate as much information as possible or to demonstrate to our fictitious visitors Earth’s current level of development. Realizing the barriers language might present, some groups elect to send up pictorial representations, such as a picture book or a work of art, which they might argue requires little or no culturally-determined knowledge of language to interpret. Groups with religious students often elect to send up copies of their preferred religious texts or an assortment thereof in an attempt to demonstrate a set of core values. Other students echo Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs, sending up the essentials that humans need to survive: water, different types of food, and some form of shelter. Still others decide to take an off-the-wall approach, hoping to show our visitors what is truly unique or even undesirable about our culture – fast food, historical texts on slavery, the Kama Sutra, or Lady GaGa’s infamous meat dress from the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. A small contingent of students question the presence of these aliens, interpreting them as a potential threat – they often elect to send up overtures for peace or even a bomb.

After the students present their lists to the class, I then ask the whole class some questions about their choices. First, I can point out that the activity asked for students to represent the totality of human culture. Are there objects, then, on some groups’ lists that someone from a different region of the United States might believe to be poor choices? How about others from France? From Kenya? From China? Second, I ask the class what assumptions they are making about the aliens based on the objects they send up. Students typically find this question puzzling, as they may not realize that they have started with some baseline assumptions about these aliens that make them conform to human standards. For instance, I might ask, “How might your lists change if I were to tell you that these aliens see heat in the same way we see light? Or what if these aliens are three inches tall?” These two questions usually lead to a lively discussion about students’ own choices as to what to send up, as well as the assumptions made about others based on little to no information.

The post-activity processing introduces students to concepts integral to both multicultural leadership and social construction, which are then joined in the subsequent class period’s lecture. This activity highlights the students’ own ethnocentrism in employing their own cultural lenses to the object selection process (Bennett, 2004). Students also are asked to consider how others’

realities may not completely match up with their own (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Elements of language and communication are touched upon – how do the students make themselves intelligible to an alien race about which they know nothing? Students are then challenged to apply these concepts to real-world situations where they have encountered an “other,” as Berger and Luckmann define it, with whom they had difficulty instigating communication and building a relationship, thus illustrating the use of this approach in considering how socially-constructed cultural differences provide barriers or opportunities for leadership.

Student feedback provides a means of assessing the value of a social constructionist approach in teaching multicultural leadership. When asked to write a one-minute paper (Angelo & Cross, 1993) about what they learned from the activity as it relates to leadership, students largely gave responses that support the course’s learning objective of considering how culture and worldviews can affect leadership relationships. For instance, one student said, “Many times we are so focused on ourselves and our own wants and needs that we fail to see past them, making us subconsciously biased by our own culture and making true inclusive leadership much more difficult.” Another wrote, “I learned that there is no way to know exactly what to send because there are so many different factors. We cannot automatically assume that everyone is like us. It’s hard to see other people’s cultures in our own world, let alone another species.” And a third writes she learned that: “You can’t walk into someone’s world and know how to live in it right away.” The next class period, after the theory of social construction is formally introduced, and students begin to make connections between social construction principles and the activity.

Student feedback showed “They’re Coming!” supported the course learning goals of understanding worldviews and the effects of their own cultural backgrounds in determining how they interact with – and forge leadership relationships with – others. Further, many of the students were able to articulate how knowledge of others’ realities might affect their leadership by being aware how both self and others might approach a situation. By using a social constructionist approach, I found that this activity made a meaningful contribution toward students’ multicultural leadership education.

### **Telling Stories**

As Berger and Luckmann stated, “the most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation. ...My and his ‘here and now’ continuously impinge on each other as long as the face-to-face situation continues... In the face-to-face situation the other is fully real” (1969, p. 28-29). Berger and Luckmann maintain that one-on-one interactions are what bring about the most potent collisions of realities, thus forcing us to re-evaluate our own realities and integrate them with those of others. In the field of leadership, Wheatley (2005, p. 4-5) echoed the importance of hearing others’ experiences: “Today, we need more storytellers. ...[We forget] how wonderful humans can be, how much hope we feel when we work well together on things we care about.”

The use of guest speakers to teach multicultural leadership can be problematic, even if the guests’ narrative conforms to that of the class (Mullins, 2001). Asking subordinate groups to share their stories of their cultural experience can be read as providing multicultural education to

dominant group members at the emotional toll of subordinate groups, thereby reifying existing divisions and power imbalances (Gorski, 2009). The approach outlined here, though, does not emphasize subordinate groups *educating* dominant group members as much as it asks guest panelists to *storytell* to students. This difference is not merely semantic. A storytelling approach allows the largely homogenous student population of the class to hear social constructions of society they have not heard before, while leaving the work of the resulting education on multicultural leadership to the instructor afterward through class discussion and reflective writing. Further, instructors of the class frequently contact panelists to ensure that the psychic toll of such experiences is not an undue burden. Past experience indicates the panelists typically appreciate the forum to share their realities with the larger student population.

Assessment conducted at the beginning of the course indicated that students had the most conscious discomfort around two social identities: people with disabilities, because of a lack of personal and societal exposure; and sexual minorities, because of negative socialization from parents, religious institutions, and peers in addition to a lack of personal exposure. To provide students with a window into how social identities can shift one's reality, I brought in speakers to share their stories with the class to illustrate how disability (Linton, 1998) and sexual identity (Cass, 1979; Fine, 2011) can affect worldview and lived experience. Therefore, for this course, my colleagues and I asked a gay male faculty member to tell his coming out story for one class period. A few weeks later, we organized a panel of students with disabilities to come in and share their experiences navigating college life. Both conversations included a discussion of how these social identities influenced the panelists' worldviews, as well as how others interact with them given their identities.

At the end of the year, students filled out comprehensive evaluations of the course where they are asked to rate the most significant experience for their learning. Student feedback indicated that these were the two most pivotal experiences for student in the course from the students' own perspective. Because of the often-hidden nature of sexual minority and disabled identities, open forums such as the ones these guest speakers provided allowed students not only to know they are engaging the other, but also to build connections with those with different social identities over gaps they did not know or did not care to know existed. Because the speakers were able to speak about their realities on campus and how they differ from dominant group members' realities, students' final exams also readily linked social construction theory to make meaning of how these stories helped to contribute to their education as developing leaders of diverse groups.

Telling stories from multiple cultural perspectives supported the course's objective of students gaining knowledge regarding the relationship between worldview and inclusion. Students were also able, through their exams and evaluations, to communicate how the experience of hearing stories from different groups challenged them to practice leadership in such a way that multiple stakeholders can engage in the process. The inclusion of diverse voices asked students to reconcile their realities with others', causing them to examine how their leadership relationships in the future may be affected given their enhanced perspective.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Ethical, caring multicultural leadership advocates for the recognition of diverse people and the incorporation of their viewpoints (Karim, 2003). Social construction as a body of theory provides a set of tools to facilitate students' ability to engage with and practice these values. Here, I have provided some methods that instructors may wish to use to teach multicultural leadership using a social constructionist approach. The "We're Coming!" alien simulation activity, careful selection of guest speakers from populations toward which students express antipathy or ignorance, and pre-existing source material can be used to present the philosophies behind multicultural leadership in a way that grounds it in a long-standing, well-researched theoretical framework.

Social construction as a body of knowledge has the potential to make strong contributions to leadership education, both in terms of multicultural leadership and of the broader discipline. The work done here examines how this pre-existing, multi-disciplinary body of theory can be used to provide scholars and students alike with the tools to better make sense of their leadership in an increasingly complex and diverse social world.

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