

The Whitewash Dilemma Revisited: White Women as Catalysts for Engendering Diverse Leadership in Organizations

What is the whitewash dilemma? Is it still relevant in today's business environment? We believe it is. In the fifteen years since the whitewash dilemma was named, the workforce has become increasingly diverse and women have made significant advancements. Yet research shows that women of color still lag behind white women in organizational access, upward mobility, and other key indicators of leadership success. Because the problem of whitewashing is systemic, we emphasize here the imperative for white women to proactively ensure equitable advancement for all women. We also intend to help guide white women in thinking about their own identity and how it influences their leadership behavior, particularly as it relates to creating opportunities for advancement of all women. After reviewing the current status of women in the U.S. and summarizing the predominant leadership concepts, we provide recommendations for improved research and leadership practices that will serve as interventions to create more inclusive and diverse organizations.

Whitewash Definition and Roots

Bettors-Reed and Moore first wrote about the *whitewash dilemma* in 1991.¹ This concept was a critique of the field of women in management, which was at that time dominated by white women researchers and practitioners. Research on women in management, particularly "glass ceiling" work that received much attention, was predominately authored by white women who ignored racial and ethnic differences among women. By ignoring differences, these researchers (and subsequently women managers) replicated the mistakes made by their white male counterparts, entrenching a hegemonic, white model of organizational leadership. This dominant thinking impacted practice as well, creating a vicious cycle of exclusion and omission. Therefore, when white women gained access to leadership positions due to their racial privilege, they not only left behind women of color, but they also created a racial and ethnic hierarchy of access and mobility, a colored glass ceiling.

Scholars in the field of psychology and women's studies, such as Schaefer and Cole, identified that although women are bound by gender similarities, they are divided by differences of race.² Schaefer wrote extensively about the white male system and how

the assimilation afforded to white women was denied to women of color. Recognition of the effect of the "white system" on the experiences of women of color was taken into consideration primarily by researchers of color whose work was not recognized in the managerial and leadership disciplines.³ Those researchers who specifically contributed to the literature on multicultural organizations criticized the exclusive behaviors of their white counterparts. Yet since these researchers of color mainly focused on race or ethnicity, they did not directly address the role white privilege plays in organizational access and mobility. Meanwhile, white women were publishing highly visible gender research on management and leadership that represented the experience of white women leaders as normative for all women.⁴

Leadership and management development concepts are rooted in the predominant paradigm of white male and female organizational experience.⁵ Women of color will not be significantly represented in leadership without a paradigm shift that recognizes the whitewash dilemma and the underlying assumptions that have inhibited the progress of women of color as organizational leaders. White women have a vital role to play in bringing about this paradigm shift. Although much attention has been paid to white men as power brokers, white women also wield power and influence due to their membership in the dominant racial group. In seeking their own advancement in the workplace, white women have a responsibility to be intentional in using their power and influence to remove barriers and clear the path for all women.

False Assumptions Resulting from the Whitewash Dilemma

The following four false assumptions prevail when the whitewash dilemma is in play. White women leaders must be aware

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of and understand these false assumptions in order to create a multicultural agenda for changing the organizational leadership paradigm.⁶

1) White women do not have race.

The membership of white men and white women in the U.S. in the dominant racial group ensures their racial norms and values are entrenched and protected. This, in turn, leads to a lack of self-exploration and awareness on the part of white men and women, as they have no need or incentive to question these norms and values. Consequently, white women do not define themselves in terms of race, nor do they necessarily understand the impact of their whiteness and culture on men and women of color around them. If white women fail to recognize what it means to be white, they unconditionally support the privileged white male system.⁷

2) All women experience discrimination the same way.

There are qualitative differences in the way women from diverse backgrounds experience organizational sexism, racism, and issues of social class.⁸ Women of color are forced to leave their cultural selves at home in order to fit into the dominant white culture at work. They are often treated as tokens where they are the only ones in their organizations, perceived to have been promoted due to affirmative action rather than skill or competence. While white women deal with gender differences at work, they are able to fit in more easily given their common cultural background to white men.

3) White women are normative models of success.

Because white women and women of color do not necessarily share the same organizational experiences, it must not be assumed that they share the same indicators of success. Definitions of success, which are heavily rooted in research and writing about white women and men, may not be useful or appropriate guidelines for women of color. Likewise, workplace problems white women have solved might not be relevant for women of color or for white women who are less privileged.⁹ Using white women's experience as the benchmark of success underscores a deficit model for women who do not fit the dominant profile and reinforces the expectation that assimilation is requisite for upward mobility.

4) White women's race does not affect their professional relationships with women of color.

White women, aware of their gender identity but unaware of their racial identity, are likewise unaware of how their racial identity affects their relationships with women of color.¹⁰ Women of color often react to this insensitivity and oppression with alienation and anger. This reaction can be painful and confusing for white women, which contributes to increased separation and distrust.

Organizational Status of Women Then and Now

Existing research does not paint a complete picture of women by race and ethnicity; instead it creates a misleading suggestion of the true progress of all women and perpetuates the white-wash dilemma. In 2006, white women represented 29% of the labor force, down from 30% in 2000. White men represented 37% of the labor force, down from 39% in 2000. Representation for African American, Asian American, and Latina women increased slightly or remained steady during the same time period.¹¹ Yet the advancement of women of color into leadership positions is not commensurate with demographic trends in the workforce.

A closer look reveals that the percentage of women holding management positions increased from 41.5% in 1992 to 51% in 2006.¹² This data was disaggregated for women of color; however, data for white women was not explicitly provided, which implies that all women are advancing equitably. This lack of data on white women is prevalent even in reports provided by organizations focused on the advancement of women. For example, Catalyst summarized the data for African American, Asian American, and Latina women on corporate boards (14.3%, 2.3%, and 4.8% respectively) in separate reports, yet did not provide a similar data sheet for white women (at 78.6%).¹³ Only data for the overall percentage of women on corporate boards (14.3%) was provided.

Equally important are the reports on earnings where earnings for women of color must be compared to earnings of white women to get an accurate picture. For example, from 1979–2005, earnings for white, African American, Asian American and Latina women either increased or leveled off when compared to earnings of white men.¹⁴ In contrast, for the same time period, earnings for women of color across race decreased when compared to earnings of white women, which means earnings for white women are increasing at a greater rate than earnings for women of color.

Despite today's availability of data on women of color in management, whitewashing continues to prevail, evident in the reporting trends where progress for women overall is highlighted and the data for white women is indiscernible. The inequity between white women and women of color is not readily apparent, and the racial privilege of white women continues to be obscured.

A Critique of Leadership Theory

Current leadership theory remains fragmented and lacks integrated study of race and gender in organizations. Early research responded to the managerial issues facing white women as they entered the ranks of management, such as gender differences in leadership styles, women's voice, and the notion of "fit" for women. Feminist researchers questioned the need for white women to assimilate into white male organizational cultures and challenged the assumption that organiza-

tional theories and practices are gender neutral. As they identified individual and institutional barriers to advancement, they coined the term “glass ceiling” to flag the invisible yet powerful barriers that inhibited “women’s” (more specifically, white women’s) advancement to upper levels of management.

As labor demographics shifted and more “minorities”¹⁵ entered the corporate world, researchers began to pay more attention to the particular issues that racial and ethnic groups faced as they entered and advanced into leadership ranks. These studies tended to focus on racioethnic group identity and implications for “fit” into predominately white organizations, without regard for gender differences. Only recently has research identified the unique issues that women of color may face (as distinct from those faced by men of color) and documented the authentic cultural voices and experiences of diverse women leaders, as distinct from majority group white women.¹⁶ Scholars developed managerial theories of multicultural organizations in an attempt to address the increasing complexity of a diverse domestic and global workforce.¹⁷

While leadership and management research and writing by women of color about women of color is increasing, very little has been written by white women regarding their responsibility to use their privilege and connection to white men to help pave the way for women of color in management. Because white women are making the significant gains in position and earnings, they must be proactive about daily practices to change their organizations to support the advancement of women of color. Below we recommend specific actions white women must take to catalyze diversification of organizational leadership.

Call to Action: Implications for Practice and Research

Practice

Organizations must adopt a strategic, culturally competent approach to leadership development to address the whitewash dilemma at a systematic level. Ownership of the issue resides with the privileged white majority, who bear the responsibility of initiating and sustaining change. Change will only occur through increased cultural awareness so that differences can be acknowledged. Each white woman has a responsibility to be proactive in her leadership behavior, which includes:

- Becoming aware of her own cultural identity and how it affects her perception and treatment of those from a different cultural background.
- Noticing and speaking up about false whitewash assumptions and observed behaviors of others.
- Intentionally building relationships with women of color.
- Educating herself about her racial ethnic group’s history and its impact on women and men of color.

- Proactively engaging in cross-cultural mentoring relationships.
- Initiating dialogue with women of color and showing up prepared for that dialogue by doing her own racial identity work.
- Acknowledging their different experiences compared to women of color while at the same time not focusing on difference helps white women create trust and build relationships with women of color.

Research

Those conducting both corporate and academic research on leadership and management need to use culturally sensitive research practices in order to acknowledge and understand the multicultural experiences of women and men. This research is crucial to catalyzing the paradigm shift necessary to eliminate the whitewash dilemma. We recommend the following research considerations:

- Studying leadership through a multicultural and interdisciplinary lens.¹⁸
- Employing the qualitative methodology of feminist research methods to capture the more inclusive and culturally authentic narrative and discursive voices of women.¹⁹
- Making explicit the racial identity of all men and women being studied. For example, if a study is about white women, it must clearly state so.
- Conducting more research on women of color to encourage more inclusive and culturally sensitive leadership models. There is a paucity of literature that documents the qualitative differences in career and organizational experiences for women by racial ethnic group identity.

The researcher’s cultural awareness will influence the choice of question and approach, and if not examined carefully, will replicate errors of previous research. Since research informs practice, awareness of these considerations will prevent researchers from perpetuating the whitewash dilemma.

Conclusion

The impact of privilege of white women and men in leadership and management in the U.S. is obscured by the whitewash dilemma. White women’s assimilation into the dominant organizational culture of white men has resulted in limited success for women overall and has not paved the way for women of color. Furthermore, women’s advancement into leadership cannot be at the expense of personal and cultural identity.

Engendering leadership to make it more diverse requires transformation in both research and practice, as well as a paradigm shift that recognizes that women of color have experiences and needs that differ from those of white women. The dominant

group, white women in particular, must assume the responsibility to change organizational culture by identifying where the whitewash dilemma exists and educating others in their organizations about its prevalence and influence on leadership succession and development. The future success of all women leaders and of business itself rests on creating truly multicultural and inclusive organizations.

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Endnotes

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⁵Betters-Reed, B.L., Moore, L.L., & Hunt, L.M. 2007. A conceptual approach to better diagnosis and resolution of cross-cultural and gender challenges in entrepreneurial research. In A. Foyolle (Ed.), *Handbook of Research in Entrepreneurship Education*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

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⁷McIntosh, P. 1988. Working Paper No. 189: *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Center for Research on Women.

⁸Bell, E.L.J.E. 1990. The bi-cultural life experience of career-oriented Black women. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 11(1): 459-77.

⁹The whitewash concept refers to race and gender; however, privilege is also conferred due to class. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss class effects. However, for a good review of class issues and how class intersects with race and gender, see Holvino, E. 2006. *CGO Insights* No. 24: "Tired of

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¹⁰Holvino, E. 1994. Women of colour in organizations. In Cross, E.Y., Katz, H.H., Miller, F.A., & Seashore, E.W. (Eds), *The Promise of Diversity*. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin.

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¹²Bureau of Labor Statistics. n.d. Household data annual averages, table 9: Employed persons by occupation, sex, and age. Retrieved from [ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat9.txt](http://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat9.txt).

¹³Catalyst. 2007. *2006 Catalyst Census of Women Board Directors of the Fortune 500*. New York: Catalyst.

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¹⁵We are sensitive to the language usage and the double meaning of the word "minorities" in this context and therefore put the word in quotes. "Minority" generally implies less than, not equivalent to, and not dominant either numerically or with respect to power and privilege.

¹⁶Examples of more recent research include Bell, E.L.J.E. & Nkomo, S.M. 2001. *Our Separate Ways*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; Catalyst. 1999. *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers*. New York: Catalyst; and Holvino, E. & Blake-Beard, S. 2004. Women discussing their differences: A promising trend. *The Diversity Factor*, 12(3): 22-29.

¹⁷Early work includes Cox, T., Jr. 1993. *Cultural Diversity in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler; Fine, M.G. 1995. *Building Successful Multicultural Organizations*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books; Thomas, D.A. & Ely, R.J. 1996. Making differences matter. *Harvard Business Review*, 74(5): 79-90.

¹⁸An example of studying leadership through a multicultural and interdisciplinary lens can be found in Bell, E.L.J.E., Myerson, D., Nkomo, S., & Scully, M. 2003. Interpreting silence and voice in the workplace. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 39(4): 381-414.

¹⁹Feminist research means studying women from their perspectives and experiences, actively seeking to remove the power imbalance between researcher and subject, and recognizing that social location of the researcher must be taken into account in the research process to address bias. See Brayton, J. 1997. What makes feminist research feminist? Unpublished essay. Retrieved from www.unb.ca/web/PAR-L/win/feminmethod.htm.

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Linking gender and organizational effectiveness

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