Feminist Theory Paper

Introduction

In her introduction to *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*, Jean Lau Chin posits that there is no singular definition of feminist leadership (2007). However, an attention to values is a theme that emerges across many scholars’ definitions of feminist leadership (Chin, 2007; Chin 2011; Lott, 2007; Moss & Pryke, 2007). Caldwell-Colbert and Albino (2007) articulate that “all leaders do not have the same values and interpersonal skills and do not express ideas, engage in behaviors, or act upon those values in the same way” (p. 78), yet they and Lott (2007) draw a direct connection between feminist values and social justice values. Lott (2007) specifically asserts that, “feminism is concerned with fostering change—political, social, and economic—in the interest of justice and maximizing opportunities for personal growth and well being” (Lott, p. 27). In alignment with Lott’s assertion regarding feminist values, my theory of feminist leadership is rooted in a commitment to living out and inspiring others towards meaningful lives characterized by passion for an abundant life. My definition of an abundant life is a life lived authentically in service to social justice. In this paper I present an overview of my professional philosophy and the principles within that reflect my theory of feminist leadership.

Professional Philosophy: Principles of Feminist Leadership

In AHE 551, Programs and Functions in College Student Services, during my first term of graduate school, I was asked to develop a professional philosophy. I find that the belief statements I penned over-two years ago still resonate with my approach to work and more specifically my approach to leadership. My professional philosophy is as follows:

The motto of my undergraduate alma mater is *Vita Abundantior*, which translated from Latin to English, means “Life More Abundant.” This motto plays a foundational role in my personal philosophy as student
affairs professional. As a student affairs professional, I am committed to living out and inspiring others towards meaningful lives characterized by passion for an abundant life.

The follow statements are my commitment to that passion:

- I believe in the power of a smile.
- I believe in one-size fits all, fits no one. **I believe in the power of education to fight oppression.**
- I believe in diversity is encompassed in our celebration of difference. **I believe in every individual’s ability to be a leader.**
- I believe in fostering the inherent good I trust exists in others. I believe in listening before speaking. I believe in balance between my personal and professional lives. I believe in integrity as well as second chances. **I believe I will always have more to learn.**

I pledge to put these beliefs into action to best serve students and institutions throughout my professional career. These beliefs have led to my *Vita Abundantior.*

These belief statements represent my values. However values alone do not define a leadership style. “Only the leader who translates the values of feminism into behaviors—and who *also* [emp. orginal] overtly gives voice and power to those values both public and privately—can be considered to have a feminist leadership style” (Caldwell-Colbert & Albino, 2007, p. 73). The three bolded statements above speak most directly to my leadership philosophy and represent the key principles of my feminist theory. I use these principles to provide examples of why my theory is feminist and how I put it into practice.

**I believe in the power of education to fight oppression**

Feminist leadership is contextual (Baker & Greene, 2007; Caldwell-Colbert & Albino, 2007; Lord & Preston, 2009; Moss & Pryke, 2007), meaning feminist leadership always exists in relationship to the environment in which it is practiced. Thus it is important to discuss how the environment of higher education impacts how I will put my leadership into action. O’Connor provides an important critique of my chosen work environment. Colleges and universities present themselves as gender-neutral meritocracies concerned who the creation of scholarship but in reality they are highly gendered organizations (O’Connor, 2011). Moss and Pryke (2007) also discuss the uniqueness of feminist practice in higher education. They suggest “[t]he concept
of a ‘feminist academic’ is in itself problematic. One aspect of an academic's work might be consciously informed by feminist beliefs and another not. (p.368). Because of the hierarchal nature of colleges and universities change brought about by feminist leadership is most visible at a local level (Moss & Pryke). I’m inspired to work in such an environment because my work has the ability to directly influence change within my sphere of influence.

I am passionate about having a career in higher education because of my belief in the ability of education to fight oppression. Chin (2007) states, [f]eminist leadership models need to have the achievement of feminist values as its goal (p.9). I agree with the scholarship that connects feminist values with social justice values (Caldwell-Colbert & Albino, 2007; Lott 2007) and I believe that fighting oppression is at the core of social justice. My understanding of social justice is informed by Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007). Social justice includes a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (p. 1). Because I believe in the power of education to fight oppression I employ a social justice lens to all aspects of my work. An example of how I’ve put this principle into action is a U-Engage course I co-taught. Part of the OSU First-Year Experience, U-Engage is an elective course that focuses on a current real-world issue or compelling question of interest as well as on providing students with information regarding campus resources and support services. Our course, The Naked Truth: Telling Our Stories; Race, Class & Power engaged students in critical dialogue about systems of oppression. The application a social justice lens is also valuable for challenging the oppression that exists within colleges and universities. Lord and Preston (2009), discuss tools that assist feminists in their
ability to not only survive but thrive in the oppressive system of higher education. They offer that it is important for effective feminist leaders to find ways to challenge the system, whilst remaining within it. Because of my commitment to a career in higher education I agree with the wisdom that I must critically engage with the oppression that exists within my work environment.

**I believe in every individual’s ability to be a leader**

The number of women in the workforce, specifically within higher education, has grown significantly over the past thirty years yet women remain disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions (Bagihole & White, 2007; Chin, 2007; Chin 2011; Lott, 2007; O’Connor, 2001). I believe that there is a connection between the number of women in leadership and how leadership is defined. Many mainstream theories of leadership unfairly benefit men and exclude marginalized populations from definitions of leadership. Trait theories, also called the great man theory because of the tendency to associate stereotypical masculine characteristics with leadership, embodies the concept that leaders are born not made (Chin, 2007; Lazzari, Colarossi & Collins, 2009). Transactional theories define leadership as an exchange of rewards for compliance (Chin, 2007; Lazzari et al., 2009), and in my opinion these theories describe a leadership style that is valued in a society that promotes capitalism and neo-liberalism. Even transformative leadership which some argue is more egalitarian has been criticized for not living up to the potential to be inclusive of feminist values (Chin, 2007; Lazzari et al., 2009). In direct response to these theories, I offer a feminist leadership theory which provocatively asserts that every individual has the ability to be a leader.

Chin (2011) examined the experiences of effective women leaders in higher education. One of the suggestions she offers is to “Be Authentic—in being true to yourself and anchored in who you are, you transmit such values to the institution; ethics, honest, and openness are
essential (p. 12). In alignment with this recommendation, I suggest that leadership is most effective when it recognizes the fullness of our identities, not that being authentic is always easy. “Authenticity as a leader is more challenging when needing to negotiate multiple and intersecting identities” (Chin, p.4). Personally I’ve struggled with how my queerness impacts how I’m viewed as a leader. When working in admissions at Cottey College, I worried about how my identity may perpetuate the lesbian stigma associated with women’s colleges due to internalized homophobia. The experience sums up what Baker and Greene meant when they stated “[w]hatever role the lesbian finds herself in, it always contains a requirement to manage social marginalization and its effects” (2007, p. 352). Now that I’m fully out, my sexuality has actually enhanced my leadership. My experience negotiating my identities directly influences my belief that everyone can be leader and that they best form of leadership is authentic.

I disagree with Caldwell-Colbert and Albino’s statement about the role of men as advocates. “Recognizing that universities and colleges have more male than female faculty, staff and administrators, the need to engage men as advocates is vital to ensuring the effectiveness of those leading from a feminist perspective” (2007, p. 84). I believe this view perpetuates the common assumption that feminist leadership can only be embodied by women. Anyone can be a leader. Anyone can be a feminist leader.

**I believe I will always have more to learn.**

Higher education is an extremely dynamic work environment. Institutions are changing and evolving more rapidly now than at any time in the past. As a student affairs professional, it is vital that I commit to on-going learning in order to keep up with the changing needs of the students and institutions that I will serve. My commitment to life-long learning is connected to my theory of feminist leadership which is rooted in the concept, “you cannot lead others farther
than you have been lead” (anonymous). I believe the moment one stops learning is the moment they cease their ability to lead effectively. Similar to the Caldwell-Colbert and Albino (2007) assertion that feminist leadership consistently re-evaluates the process through which decisions are made and implemented, my theoretical approach to leadership will remain dynamic and open to continued re-evaluation in order to stay current. The need for such an approach is illustrated by Chin’s (2011) critical analysis of current leadership theories. Critiqued through the lens of gender, her analysis points out that current leadership models are insufficient in their ability to challenge institutional norms that contradict feminist values. A commitment to continued learning offers the possibility of contributing to the creation of new scholarship. Without being open to ongoing learning, leadership will continue to be defined by outdated and archaic values.

**Conclusion**

*Vita Abundantior*, which translated from Latin to English, means ‘Life More Abundant’, is the goal of my feminist leadership theory. My definition of an abundant life is a life lived authentically in service to social justice. My professional philosophy, specifically the principles discussed in this paper, support such a life. I opted to highlight the following principles: (a) I believe in the power of education to fight oppression; (b) I believe in every individual’s ability to be a leader; (c) I believe I will always have more to learn. I chose these because of the foundation they provide upon which each of the other belief statements can be built.

In this paper, I’ve presented an overview of my professional philosophy and the principles within that reflect my theory of feminist leadership. By linking these statements to feminist scholarship, I have demonstrated how my theory fits within the broader conversations about what constitutes feminist leadership. As discussed earlier, values without action do not
define a leadership style. In a similar way these principles without action will not lead to *Vita Abundantior*. 
References


