

Public Abstract

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Title:LEADING IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER

While there is much work on the Mississippi Delta, it is varied. There is a large literature base focusing on the Civil Rights Movement. There is also a large literature base focusing on the social and economic issues such as persistent poverty, access to health care, and educational attainment deficits. During the 1980s and 1990s work was conducted to better understand the changes in the Delta since the Civil Rights Movement. Since then there have been many firsts for women and African Americans in the region. For African American men, they were beginning to be elected into positions that were traditionally held by white men. Most notably, they were being elected in towns where black men had never served as mayor. Further, women were increasing their numbers in terms of elected leadership, particularly as mayors of small towns. These strides have yet to be captured in research. Therefore, this study is exploratory. The dissertation work is concerned with structure and agency in the rural Mississippi Delta. It also considers social structures such as race, class and gender as contested power relations (Anderson & Collins, 2001). In this region, it has long been considered that structures such as race shape relationships and ability to act in the Delta. However, to what extent is this still true? Do leaders still discuss race as an important factor in their ability to lead in the Delta? More women are moving into leadership positions. From research conducted in other parts of the United States on women in leadership we know they experience unique problems that can be attributed to gender. Do women leaders in the Delta share similar experiences and if so how do they constrain and enable them in their leadership position. Finally, is social class an important factor in leadership in the Mississippi Delta? These are all areas in which this work will contribute. Further, this work can provide leadership development programs with current information on how structures such as race, gender and class are operating in 2009. Using a life history approach, interviews were conducted with nineteen Delta mayors. Participants note how structures such as race, class and gender shape power relations. Findings show that race still structures relationships in the Mississippi Delta. The work also shows how gender in a rural area is a constraint for female leaders. The work also found ways in which social class enable and constrain mayors. Social institutions such as the church, family and community are also considered as participants noted the importance of these institutions in learning about leadership.