

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

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

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DEDICATIONS

My wonderful husband Jason... You never questioned for one minute setting out on this journey. You just said, "Let's go." You have put up with some crazy things—mood swings, crying jags, a lot of studying hours, and done it with a smile on your face (you may not have always meant it, but you smiled)! I could not ask for a more dedicated partner.

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

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ABSTRACT

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 1980's and 1990's 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.

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.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Dissertation Journey

During the summer of 2008 I returned to the Mississippi Delta. It is a place that captures your attention with its beautiful flat lands, people so full of life and its many challenges that these individuals live on a daily basis. My work has always centered on this unique region. Starting at Delta State University in 2002 in the Master's of Community Development program, I developed an intense interest in leadership in the region. I was fortunate to work with individuals in the region that were well known leaders and committed to enhancing the leadership skills of Deltans through leadership development programs. My work started as evaluations of these programs. Through the evaluation process, I wrote about how individuals developed skills, resources and knowledge through programming to work more effectively in their communities.

However, arriving at the University of Missouri opened my perspective on the necessary work needed in leadership literature. I found that rural sociology had a lot to contribute to the somewhat narrow focus of the traditional literature on leadership which is dominated by management theories and research on how to develop skills. People do not enter positions of leadership in a vacuum. They enter the programs with various cultural understandings about leadership. They also enter with unique sets of challenges and barriers that impact their ability to practice leadership fully. Therefore, this research attempts to better understand some of these factors such as race, class and gender, in how leadership is constructed and practiced in the Mississippi Delta.

However, in starting such a process I was not sure what I would find. 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 1980's and 1990's work was conducted to better understand the changes in the Delta since the Civil Rights Movement. Researchers such as Wirt (1997) and Duncan (1999) provided work that documented changes in the lives of both African Americans and Caucasians following the 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. I had some ideas of what I might find based on experience, what I heard in general conversation and living in the Delta for six years, but there was no systematic, in-depth work on this group.

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. Thus, this study does not draw conclusions about these factors in society as a whole, but rather within the community that is the Mississippi Delta.

In this work I wanted to privilege the voice of the interview participants and, since this is exploratory, I believe this is appropriate. I did not know what I would find and therefore, in writing the dissertation I will let the participants speak before the academic literature is presented. Below I will further explain the format.

Overview of Chapters

Following this introduction, is the chapter of methods used in the research. First, it is necessary to provide an overview of how research in the field of leadership has been conducted. Alvesson (1996) notes there is vast research in the field of leadership. Much of this work takes a quantitative approach in considering leadership. The criticisms of this approach are explored. Most notably quantitative research is criticized for failing to take context into consideration. The work conducted by qualitative researchers and its criticisms are discussed. Post modern approaches to leadership research are also explored. Finally, community leadership studies in sociology and political science are discussed.

The chapter moves on to discuss the role of Strauss and Glaser's (1967) "theoretical sensitivity" in this work. My personal and professional experiences in the Delta are outlined. Also, the way in which the academic literature is used in this work is

highlighted. Rather than using the literature to anchor the problem at hand, it is used to better explore those areas the participants felt were important in their construction and practice of leadership. The chapter moves on to explore the rationale for selecting the Mississippi Delta as the research site as well as subject selection and sampling procedures. A total of thirty-seven letters were sent to potential participants. A total of nineteen interviews were conducted hence making a fifty-one percent response rate. Six participants were African American females, one was a white female, five were white males and seven were African American females.

The theory of the active interview by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) informed the interview work. This work was complemented by the narrative approach utilized by Shamir et al (2005). The approach and challenges in the process of analysis were also outlined in this chapter. Finally, the methodological and analytical constraints are highlighted. Issues such as using experience as a means of research, situated and mediated experience and the notion of truth are discussed in detail.

Chapter three sets the context and provides an overview of the Mississippi Delta. The chapter starts with my personal reflections. I moved to Mississippi in my teenage years and had the opportunity to live in both the “hills” and the Delta. This cultural difference is explored. Learning from the participants in the research, it was clear that the plantation economy was still an important starting point in understanding the region. Next, though the participants were either still children or in their late teen years during the Civil Rights Movement it was, of course, still vital in how they discussed leadership. Therefore, the efforts to organize social change efforts in Mississippi are discussed. The

chapter then moves onto previous research which has documented the changes in attitude about race in the Mississippi Delta.

Interviews also revealed certain cultural factors that were important in how they construct and practice leadership. Thus, this chapter takes up the role of church and family. It is placed here instead of the larger review of literature because of how these two institutions are tied to the place in which they practice leadership. Finally, a statistical overview of the Mississippi Delta in 2009 is provided.

Chapter four consists of the analysis. As discussed previously, it was my wish to privilege the voice of the interviewees over the academic literature. The analysis clearly showed that certain social institutions and experiences were important in constructing their understanding about leadership. The roles of the family and community were cited as helping to construct an understanding of leadership. Next, the church played an important role in constructing understandings of leadership and campaign resources. Within the church messages of empowerment and service were conveyed that influenced leaders though there were racial differences in what the churches conveyed. For African Americans, leadership was also a cause. Most often the cause was expressed in terms of social justice. Therefore, racism also played an important part in understandings about leadership. For some, experiences of racism were a motivation for in running for office. These experiences stayed with them and shaped future endeavors. Next, some used racism in terms of gauging race relations within their community. Experiencing racism and comparing it to current race relations in their community was often a tool in understanding what needed to be done in terms of practicing leadership. Finally, for

African Americans, the Civil Rights Movement played an important role in both practicing and constructing the role of leader.

The chapter then shifts. Participants discussed the ways in which race, class and gender affected the campaign process and relationships once they took office. First, women often discussed instances where gender was a constraint in running for office and once they took office. Also discussed is gender as an advantage as well as intersection of gender and social class. Race also operated in different ways during the campaign and once office was taken. Race was also discussed as a disadvantage among both whites and African Americans. This disadvantage was most often discussed in terms of the ability to work within the community, bridging a racial divide and the challenge of changing “mind sets.” Finally, the intersection of race and social class is discussed.

The analysis ends with a discussion of the challenge of balancing public and private life. Interviews revealed that gender clearly is important in discussing this area. Women discussed the challenges and support system needed in order to be an elected official as well as wife, mother, etc. at great length. In terms of the men, approximately forty percent discussed the challenges they saw their family deal with as a result of running for office. The other sixty percent of men did not really discuss challenges, but rather saw their wives as enjoying benefits associated with their role.

Following the analysis is the review of literature. The review of literature focuses on those areas which emerged as important in the analysis. First, an overview of traditional leadership literature is provided. The bureaucratic model, transformational leadership model and power approach within political science are reviewed. The purpose of this review is to provide the reader with an understanding of where much of the

literature is based. It is also provided because the bulk of leadership work does little to inform leadership in small, rural communities. It also does little to include the context in which leadership happens.

The next body of literature reviewed is on structure, agency and culture. It was clear from the analysis that individuals saw themselves as agentic, but working within constraints. Therefore, what does the sociology literature have to contribute to our understanding and issues presented by the participants in this research? The work of Swidler (1986), Sewell (1992), Emirbayer and Mische (1998), and Hays (1994) is reviewed on the matter. Third, the sociology literature on gender and governance are reviewed in conjunction with research in the field of leadership which details challenges women face in the political arena. Understanding leadership and governance as gendered will help understand the experiences of the women in this study.

Fourth, the sociological theory on race is reviewed. Race is obvious an important structure in leadership in the Mississippi Delta. Therefore, what can this body of literature lend to our understanding of what participants report? Following this discussion is literature on empowerment and black political empowerment. Participants conveyed different messages about the purpose of leadership. For African Americans their understanding was firmly rooted in the notion of empowerment. Black political empowerment theory refers research which has considered the election of African Americans as a factor in political participation of other blacks. Finally, the literature on social class is consulted. The final chapter links the analysis and review of literature. The discussion also takes into consideration the contributions this exploratory work makes to different bodies of literature. It also considers the limitations present. It also

considers ways in which this research can be further extended to look at any one of the issues presented in more depth.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

Leadership studies have largely been dominated by quantitative studies. The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the debate within leadership studies over whether to use qualitative or quantitative methods. Next, the method of this study is discussed. The chapter outlines my place as researcher in this study. The section makes known my connection to the area of study such as personal experience, professional experience and the literature engaged with prior to the research project. This is done within the context of Glaser and Strauss's concept of theoretical sensitivity. This is an important conversation as I take the stance that interviews are co-constructed and thus the researcher must practice reflexivity. Alvesson et al. (2000) argue the researcher must reflect upon his or her own place in the process as well as the "relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions." The researcher must also take into consideration their own cultural background in the research process.

Next, the chapter discusses the rationale for selecting the Mississippi Delta as the site of study. Subject selection is discussed. The chapter also focuses on the interview as the primary data collection tool. Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) work on the active interview is used. The research framework is also guided by Sharmir et al's (2005) work with a narrative approach to leadership research. The work on grounded theory by Glaser & Strauss (1967) is also part of the methodological frame.

Third, the chapter focuses on the data analysis. The process followed as well as challenges I faced are discussed. Finally, the chapter details the methodological and analytical considerations and limitations of the approach outlined. This includes a

conversation about the use of experience as analytical tool, experience as mediated and issues surrounding the idea of truth.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Methods in Leadership Research

Literally thousands of studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of leadership. Though one research approach clearly dominates the literature, the field as a whole is becoming more receptive to the idea of expanding the approaches in order to understand leadership. This is particularly important given the criticism of such field experts as Alvesson (1996) who argues that “the outcome of these enormous efforts has been meager” (p. 457). This section outlines the qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of leadership. It attempts to critique the effectiveness and weaknesses of the multiple ways research is conducted. Within this discussion the positivist/empiricist approach to leadership research is critiqued as it has received much attention in the last twenty years. Alternatives to this approach to research are provided.

It should first be noted that the bulk of leadership research to date comes from a positivistic orientation. Alvesson (1996) even argues that studies that claim to use an alternative approach (i.e. qualitative methods) tend to fall into the same positivistic mode that relies on studies maintaining/achieving “objectivity, neutrality, technique, quantification, replicability, generalization, discovery of laws, etc.” (p. 455). This orientation will be further discussed later. Studies have also heavily relied on quantitative methods with questionnaire research being the most popular (Bass, 1990). But, beyond just this quantitative orientation it is also an orientation heavily rooted within the field of psychology (Parry, 1998). Researchers attempt to understand the causal relationship among leaders, followers and the subsequent actions taken within the

relationship. Either the manager (also known as the leader in this research which is discussion for another question) or the subordinates (followers) are asked to choose from categories predetermined by the researcher on how they supposedly “feel” about the relationship. Or, leaders are asked to self-rate. Yukl (1989) also states that we have learned much about “leadership traits, behavior, power, and situational factors” (p. 254) once again largely through questionnaires. The research is most often conducted within a formal organizational environment (more bluntly put—a corporate environment).

There are several weaknesses associated with this approach. First, some argue that quantitative research fails to recognize the distinct contexts in which the study occurs. Response categories in questionnaires do not allow for the inclusion of the social reality (Alvesson, 1996). Others argue that much of the questionnaire research includes a positive bias as sometimes leaders are asked to self rate or followers are instructed by their managers (also referred to interchangeably in the literature as “leaders”) to fill out the survey (Bass, 1990; Alvesson, 1996). Some also believe that the quantitative research to date has inadequately explored leadership as a process and oftentimes the theories generated by these studies do not accurately reflect the complexities of the leadership relationship (Bass, 1990; Alvesson, 1996; Osborn et al., 2002). Finally, other researchers argue that the bulk of the leadership theory generated from this type of research does not translate well into practice and thus they advocate for alternate approaches to generating leadership research (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003).

Qualitative approaches to leadership research are starting to make an impact on leadership research. In fact, Bryman & Stephens, (1996) point out that in the third edition of the *Handbook of Leadership* (1990) Bass & Stogdill call for the inclusion of

qualitative methods as a means of overcoming some of the challenges to the quantitative approach and some researchers have taken up the call. Within the field, methods such as interviews, case studies, life histories, participant observation and even ethnographies are increasingly employed. Authors such as Parry (1998) argue for a use of grounded theory analysis in leadership research. He argues that grounded theory has the potential to include the social process of leadership the quantitative methods leave out. This approach to understanding leadership also leaves open the door to documenting informal leadership processes. As Parry notes, “mainstream research instruments can evaluate informal leaders, but they have been less successful at evaluating informal leadership processes” (p. 91). The inclusion of such methodologies opens another perspective to leadership which has a seemingly sociological dimension rather than the psychological approach which considers individuals but rarely the social and contextual nature of leadership.

Though much has been said about the positive insights qualitative research can bring to understanding leadership, we must also consider the weaknesses of such an approach. It does not seem we can overcome the critique of producing positive bias in leadership research. Some in the field caution researchers that error in self-rating still may occur as individuals may report what is considered “expected leader behavior” rather than actual behavior as the interviewee tries to maintain a good impression (Alvesson, 1996; Bass, 1990). There are multiple realities that may be involved in the leadership process and there is a danger of only capturing some of the realities and not capturing a complete picture of the process. Others argue that qualitative methods lend themselves

too much to understanding the contextual and are unable to generalize across a large sample like it is argued the quantitative studies are able to do (Bass, 1990).

As mentioned previously there are critiques that neither of the approaches discussed above move beyond a positivistic orientation to research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) assert that “if carried out correctly and methodically, grounded theory meets the criteria for “good” scientific research. Those criteria are significance, theory-observation, compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigor, and verification” (Parry, 1998 p. 89). Authors such as Tierney (1996) and Alvesson (1996) argue that the field needs to move even further beyond the qualitative/quantitative debate. Both discuss the need to reframe research within the context of postmodernism. The post modern view advocates a view of the world “where individuals are inundated with multiple voices that create a cacophony of sound and an inability to make complete sense of reality” (Tierney, 1996 p. 372). Rather than considering a pattern when entering a research environment, the researcher should be concerned with difference.

Language is also an important piece of the postmodern argument. At different points each argues that language used within a particular context to discuss leadership and processes has its own history. Alvesson (1996) further argues that research must not begin the process by attaching labels or “totalizing concepts” (p. 468) as the researcher may miss other interpretations of the process being studied. Some also argue that a postmodern approach to leadership research would also move away from the individual as unit of analysis to an approach that considers the constraints in any given situation. “The challenge is to see how a particular individual was able to create change or was unable to create change not necessarily because of a particular individualistic flaw, but

rather by the constraints place on a role within an organization” (Tierney, 1996 p. 374). This has largely been missing from mainstream leadership research.

Finally, there is a strong call for reflexivity. Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) define this process as, “the self-critical consideration of one’s own assumptions and consistent consideration of alternative interpretive lines and the use of different research vocabularies.” Instead of seeing the researcher as objective to the research process, the research process itself is viewed as constructed/interpreted by the researcher. This research is also similar to other research in the field of leadership.

In terms of the overall approach used is as follows. First, important in the study was the use of narrative. This is similar to other work such as Shamir et al. (2005) and Thomas (2008) in that these crucibles were important factors in the individuals practice and understanding of leadership. The research also takes a postmodernist approach in that this work also focuses heavily on context. The work is conducted with the understanding that multiple voices can impact the individuals understanding and practice of leadership. This research focuses on the constraints in the leadership process such as race, class and gender. The findings will further explore these areas.

Now, the discussion must turn briefly to how leadership is studied within the community context as opposed to other formal organizational environments. Research projects that include community leadership as a component include strictly qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as frequently employing mixed method approaches.

Some of the first community leadership studies used a framework by Hunter (1963) to study community power structure. This framework was used to understand the

sources of local policy, who was best served by the policy and the process by which policy is created and put in place. It is noted that these studies started a debate in terms of community leadership and the study of power. Critics argued that the framework only studied one dimension of power—to understand the policy component—and ignored the role of elites and issues of exclusion in exercising community power. In response Hunter (1963) developed a reputational approach to study community leadership and power. Hunter (1963) argued that community decisions were made by a small, powerful group of elite leaders. But, the work of Dahl (1961) argued that power in communities is distributed across a larger number of groups and individuals in a community than the Hunter studies found. He argued that a decisional approach to community power and leadership was needed rather than a reputational (Israel & Beaulieu, 1989).

Israel & Beaulieu (1989) argue that Wilkinson's interactional field perspective was an important development in terms of how to study community leadership. They argue that this framework allows the "measurement of frequency, interconnection, and other important elements of community actions" (p. 185).

Current community leadership studies often focus on those features that critics of the mainstream literature feel are neglected. For example, Brown and Nylander (1998), using a mixed method approach, study the structure of community leadership in rural communities calling this approach the "sociology of community leadership" (p. 71). They are more concerned with how the structure is developed and maintained in a community rather than the individuals involved. O'Brien et al. (1991; 1998) study the role of the networks of leaders in facilitating community viability. In conducting their

study they employed historical analyses as well as what they call “ethnographic reconnaissance” (p. 704) among other methods of inquiry.

One of the most notable features of both the Brown and Nylander (1998) and O’Brien et al. (1991; 1998) studies was the means of choosing their sample. In many leadership studies from the mainstream literature the leaders are identified as those who are usually managers or executives in a company. They are identified and selected on position only. In the community leadership studies there appears to be a greater chance of also bringing in informal community leaders into the research process. Not only are positional (i.e. elected officials) leaders identified but, through using a reputation approach, other influential citizens important in the community are identified. This approach overcomes some of the critique of postmodernists that leadership is assumed just by position and not explored in other formats. Furthermore, approaches such as this overcome the critique that the focus is on individuals. The individuals are embedded in social processes which are explored.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have served to help researchers and practitioners better understand leadership. The field has largely been dominated by quantitative studies of managers. Qualitative research has provided a better understanding of context and some researchers seem inclined to follow a grounded theory approach. Newer to leadership studies is the call for a postmodern approach to the study of leadership. Finally, the use of a sociological lens to better understand the different facets of leadership has largely been under utilized. Rural sociologists such as Israel and Beaulieu (1989), Brown and Nylander (1998) and O’Brien et al. (1991; 1998) have introduced studies in the last twenty years using sociology to better understand the

processes of community leadership. This next section of this chapter outlines the methodological choices made for this research.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Based on the work of Glaser & Strauss (1967) theoretical sensitivity was important in the process of choosing the location of study, considering the potential sample and determining appropriate questions. My professional and personal experience as well as knowledge of existing literature guided this process. In particular, the personal and professional experiences shaped the process in important ways. Throughout the research endeavor, these sensitivities are evident in the decision making process and are highlighted as important in the recognition of my role as researcher as an active participant in constructing this experience with interviewees.

Professional Experience

I have conducted leadership research and evaluation in the Mississippi Delta for almost seven years. Starting in 2002, I was assigned as a graduate student to the Delta Emerging Leaders Program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This program focused on existing and “emerging” leaders in eighteen counties of the Mississippi Delta. During this experience, I started to ask questions concerning the effectiveness of leadership development programs and thus focused Masters Thesis work on such questions. The program also served as an arena for participants to discuss sensitive issues such as race within the Delta. Being privy to those sometimes hard conversations sparked an interest early on to one day look at the area more closely.

In 2005, I had the opportunity to join the staff of the Mid-South Delta Leaders Program. This program was a tri-state partnership with Delta State University in

Mississippi, Arkansas State University and Grambling State University in Louisiana. The program also focused on recruiting a diverse group of leaders, but this time in the fifty-five county region of the ARK-LA-MS Delta. Serving as evaluator, I had access once again to a large group of mostly “grassroots” leaders, meaning they had never held elected office. Through evaluating the training, I again saw participants struggle with those relationships that were seemingly structured through race, social class and gender.

Though I had experience and ready made relationships with these leaders, the decision was made to extend the pool of potential participants for the PhD dissertation project. Further, in order to provide a bit more of a challenge in terms of entry for research as well as exposing me to a new perspective on leadership relationships in the Delta, only elected officials were used for the study (more about this process is to follow). I was also interested in understanding the roles of race, class and gender in the election process. The Mississippi Delta is a prime location to further these understandings as will be shown in the chapter on the region.

Personal Experience

I was a resident of the Mississippi Delta for six years. This time provided exposure to the area which someone only studying the area for a short time may not get. Living, working and taking care of needs in the Delta provided first hand experience with the issues that participants in the study may discuss. Further, it provided another source in which to draw important questions for the participants to consider. Living in the region also provided some sense of understanding of the issues that towns have faced in recent years due to media coverage. Just having access to local news during that time also proved important. Finally, as a resident one makes friends. These friendships also

provided ideas, particularly in terms of race, of the types of questions necessary and an understanding of how to facilitate a conversation around this sensitive topic.

The Use of Literature

In conducting work on the Mississippi Delta, particularly in leadership, the formal, published work mostly centered on those leaders that were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement in the region. These leaders have been interviewed extensively for numerous books, academic articles and documentaries. Much work on the Mississippi Delta has also focused on issues such as persistent poverty, education, health care and other such social structure concerns. Further, the region has also been the center of a prolific number of studies about the agrarian shifts and subsequent impacts on African Americans.

However, beginning in 2000, the Delta has begun to see many “firsts” in terms of the election of African Americans and females. Prior to 2000, those African Americans elected were thought to simply have gained office as the eventual “giving up” of Whites in terms of holding onto elected positions in the face of a majority African American (now voting) population. Also, the region has seen the election of women. Therefore, there are new voices in the form of women and African Americans that need introducing into the evolving social landscape of the Mississippi Delta. Of particular interest is their experience as it relates to the election process and then performing the leadership roles and what challenges and opportunities were part of that experience.

Finally, the literature was used both as topic and tool in terms of exploring the history of the Mississippi Delta. Pickering (2008) argues that

“History can be conceived as a broad set of resources for studying everyday cultures in the past and as a broad set of resources for thinking

about historical experience and representation in the present. The two-way focus this involves is intended to address the ways in which history shapes and informs current cultural practices and formations, and the ways in which history is only accessible to use analytically through our cultural participations and understandings in the present” (p. 194).

Utilizing historic texts which described the agrarian context, Civil Rights Movements and subsequent changes to the social landscape provided important information about the potential cultural practices and understandings of the leadership. Cobb (1992) quotes Lawrence Levin as saying the following about culture and history: “Lawrence Levine has argued that culture is less “a fixed condition” than “a process: the product of interaction between past and present” (p. x). Studying the history of the region is an important analytical tool in interpreting the data of this study. It must be interpreted within the context and, in the case of the Mississippi Delta, the history proved to be an important part of the interpretative process.

The Rationale for Selecting the Mississippi Delta as Study Site

The theories of cultural geography provide ample justification of why it is important to focus on a specific context. Lee (1997) argues that cultural geography seeks to explore the relationship between human agency, social process and spatial location. But, he feels that spatial location receives less focus and is in danger of becoming marginalized to human agency and social process. Lee (1997) also argues that one must think about the culture of the place, not just the cultural dispositions of individuals, social groups, classes or ethnic groups.

This point is especially relevant for a study of leadership in the Mississippi Delta. The Delta itself has a cultural context that must be considered. One may ask why this focus is important. As a former resident of the Mississippi Delta I have many stories that

explain why the overall cultural context matters. But, one example in particular makes this point very well. I moved from what is known in Mississippi as “the hills” to the Delta. In “the hills” when a person asks where you are from the most likely response is the name of a specific town. If you ask a person of the Mississippi Delta where they are from, they overwhelmingly respond they are from “the Delta” leaving out the name of a specific town. Furthermore, Lovell (2004) found that when Mississippi Delta leaders were asked to define their community, respondents most often described the Mississippi Delta region as their community and not a neighborhood, city or county. Cobb (1992) also discusses a similar finding from work conducted in the region.

Therefore, it is my position that the culture of the region is unique from other locations in Mississippi. It is important to distinguish the region as such when considering the intersection of race, social class and gender of the process of constructing leadership relationships in the region. Further, social institutions such as community, church and family are formulated within the culture of the Delta.

Finally, the region of the Mississippi Delta can be defined geographically many different ways. Foundations, governments and non-profits all have various ways of defining the geographical space that is the Mississippi Delta. For this study, eleven counties were selected from the eighteen that can be classified as core Delta.

Subject Selection

For this study a total of nineteen Mississippi Delta mayors were interviewed. A total of thirty-seven letters were sent making the response rate approximately fifty-one percent. The sample procedure was as follows. First, the mayors of the county seats of eleven Delta counties were selected. The original intent of the research was to interview

consecutive mayors in these county seats. However, I experienced several issues in this original plan. First, I found that several of the mayors were deceased. Next, many were in ill health and unable to take part in long interviews. Finally, I found a reluctance among some of the white men who were previous mayors in the county seats to take part in the research. From the original sampling plan of only including individuals who were mayors in the county seats a total of nine mayors were interviewed. Three were female and six were male. Three were white and six were African American.

It was then decided to attempt to balance out the sample to include more women and whites. The sample was expanded to include all female mayors in the eleven county sample area. At the time there were a total of thirteen women as sitting mayors in the sample area. By extending the invitation to those women another four were added for a total of seven women in the interview sample. This means that fifty-three percent of the current sitting female mayors in the sample area were interviewed. Six are African American and one white. The white woman is the only white woman elected as mayor in the sample area.

In an attempt to expand the sample once more to include more men, particularly white men, letters were sent to mayors in towns with populations over 1,000. This garnered more participation from white and black men. Three more white men and three additional black men agreed to participate. Therefore, in terms of men a total of five white men and seven black men participated.

Participants were initially contacted through a letter explaining the purpose of the research. Also included in the letter was a recommendation from a well known Delta leader, Dr. Myrtis Tabb who directs the Mid-South Delta Leaders Program and is an

Associate Vice President at Delta State University. This letter served as an introduction as well as “vouched” for me as someone who has worked in the Delta for sometime. This was an important step in gaining entry. In fact, the lone white female of the study told me that it was Dr. Tabb’s letter that caused her to participate.

Approximately two weeks after the letters were mailed, telephone calls were made in an attempt to schedule interviews. This was a lengthier process than I first thought it would be. Many of the mayors in the sample are “part time” and are not in city hall very often. This meant I had to obtain home, work or cell phone numbers in order to reach them. Sometimes this proved problematic as the secretaries were not always willing to provide the information. Directory assistance was used in some cases and in others the researcher went to the city hall in question to talk to the secretary and provide a business card.

The interviews took place in a number of locations. Often times they were conducted at city hall, but also within their homes, place of business or through sharing a meal. The longest interview lasted three and a half hours and the shortest was one and a half hours. Most lasted two hours.

Finally, in terms of the subjects for selection, I recognize the work left out individuals in the community that are considered community leaders or knowledgeable, but were not served in formal leadership roles. This is an important aspect of the overall community leadership interaction in a locale as discussed above (Brown & Nylander, 1998; O’Brien 1991; 1998), but conceptually the group does not fit the intent of this particular research program.

Informal leaders undoubtedly have stories of how race, gender and social class construct their relationships and activities in the Mississippi Delta (Hayes & Lovell, 2008). However, part of the intent of this research was to see how race, gender and social class affect the attainment of a formal leadership position and how it continues to affect their ability to work within that position. Formal leadership positions require civic action by residents in an election and represent a quantitative difference between formal and informal leaders. Future analysis of both this dissertation material and the work of Hayes & Lovell (2008) may provide more insight into how these constructions are similar or different for the groups.

Method of Data Collection

Interviewing is the primary research technique. The overarching interview theory is the “active interview” as identified by Holstein and Gubrium (1995).

According to the authors:

Reality is constituted at the nexus of the hows and whats of experience, by way of interpretive practice—the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize, and represent reality (Holstein, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Active interviewing is a form of interpretive practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources, and orientations with what Garfinkel (1967) calls “practical reasoning.” Linking artfulness to substantive contingencies implies that whereas reality is continually “under construction,” it is assembled using the interpretive resources at hand. Meaning is not constantly formulated anew, but reflects relatively enduring local conditions, such as the research topics, biographical particulars, and local ways of orientating to those topics (Gubrium, 1988, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994) (p. 16).

The idea that the interview process is actively constructed is very important. The respondents are not to be seen as vessels of knowledge waiting to be tapped; rather they are to be seen as constructors of reality. I am not necessarily concerned wholly with just

the content of the interviews, but rather how they construct their leadership experience and later apply those meanings to actually achieving the formal leadership position.

The theory of the active interview is complemented by using the work of Sharmir et al. (2005) as a guide. A narrative approach will be employed as one means to understand the events that lead to the achievement of the leadership position. This approach differs from a retrospective approach which is also a popular means of conducting leadership research (see Avoilio & Gibbons, 1988; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1992). A retrospective approach seeks to discover life events that may have impacted the individual's leadership style and outlook. These events include "loss of a parent, the successful resolution of a life crisis, difficult or nurturing family circumstances, high parental expectations, travel outside the homeland, relationships with mentors and role models, and involvement in many leadership roles early in life" (Sharmir et al., 2005 p. 16). Thomas (2008) found that leaders often times cite events that happened outside their professional world that have had the most impact on how they view and practice leadership.

In a narrative approach, the events themselves are not the only unit of analysis; the text of the conversation is important as well. Sharmir et al. (2005) argue that this approach makes no assumption about the meaning of specific events, but that the "events and experiences chosen by leaders to appear in their life stories reflect the leaders' self-concepts and their concept of leadership, and allow or enable them to enact their leadership role" (p. 17). The assumption of the approach is that a meaning system impacts the ways in which a person thinks, feels and acts and this system also affects how individuals interpret reality (Sharmir et al., 2005; Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Kegan

& Lahey, 1984). It can be argued that this approach can also be used to expand opportunities to discover those events and/or structures that the leader feels enabled or constrained them in their movement toward a formal leadership position which was central to the findings in this study. This method has also been used to better understand how these events or crucibles enable leaders to learn about the practice of leadership (Thomas, 2008). Thus, the use of a life history or narrative approach is well suited to the study at hand.

It is important to note that this research process also used certain techniques associated with grounded theory. According to Bowen (2006), the grounded theory approach is a “research approach or method that calls for a continual interplay between data collection and analysis to produce a theory during the research process. A grounded theory is derived inductively through the systematic collection and analysis of data pertaining to the phenomena” (p. 2). It should be noted that I did not adhere to the approach in every way. Because the research at hand is somewhat limited in that only one interview with each participant was conducted, there was not the opportunity to continually go back to these individuals or interact with them in other settings. More will follow on how the pieces of this approach were used in the research.

The interview guide was constructed from several resources. Since it was a life history approach, the basic framework was the life course starting with childhood which was defined from first memories to age 12. Youth was defined from 13 to 18. Early adulthood was defined as 19-30. Finally, the last category was adulthood. Using Parker (2005) who also conducted research on race, gender and leadership among African

American women, this researcher took cues from this interview guide. The following questions were taken from this guide:

- Tell me about the family that raised you.
- What were the roles of the individuals in your family? In this question, the original author included this as roles in family of rearing. However, I also used this question to better understand the composition/roles of their current family structure (i.e. husband, wife, children, etc.)
- Are there any parental behaviors or attitudes that you admired as a child that you have come to reflect as an adult?
- What other adults impacted you during this time frame?
- Focusing on high school and your early adult years, describe any critical incidents, significant experiences, persons or events that influenced you. The original author used the phrase “college years” in the place of “early adult years.” However, it was assumed in this study that it was likely that not all participants went to college. Thus, it was changed.

Bennis and Thomas (2007) also served as a guide in creating the interview schedule.

From their work the following questions were used:

- What are your first memories of being a leader? When did you first recognize yourself as a leader?
- What differences do you see between your children and your generation? What differences do you see between your generation and your parent’s generation? (For this research, the phrase “in terms of commitment to public service and community life” were added.)

These authors also used a fill in the blank list that participants filled out regarding most influential non-fiction work, fiction work or movies/documentaries. For this research, this was modified and the question “Are there books or movies that have influenced you in terms of your ideas, understandings or ways you practice leadership was included.

Sawyer (2005) was also used in the construction of the interview guide. The following question was used:

- What events shaped your thinking regarding public activities and political influence?

I developed the remaining questions and they include:

- Did you become involved in any leadership activities in your youth? What did you learn from them?
- Can you talk about what made you get involved in community politics?
- Can you talk about the election process as you experienced it? What were your most significant resources in running for office? What do you feel were your advantage in the campaign process? What do you feel your disadvantages were in the process?
- Once you got into office, what did you see as your strengths? Weakness as a leader?
- What are the challenges to leading in the Mississippi Delta?
- What are the challenges in balancing your public life as a mayor and your home life?
- Given your experience, how do you define leadership?
- What are those leadership skills or attributes that you feel are most important to leading in the Delta?
- Have you ever participated in a leadership development program? If so, which one? What kind of resources do you feel are most important for elected officials to have in a community leadership development program?

In the actual interview process I learned after the second interview that if the interview began with, “Can you start with ‘I was born on,’ and tell me about your life up until the point you got involved in community politics” that the participant most often told me with little prompting about those experiences, people, or events that were most important at each stage of their life. The first twenty minutes of each interview was simply a narrative of their life story. This was important because it allowed them to self select those things that were most important without the interviewer leading them. They were able to shape their story without the interviewer asking specific questions. It was telling in many cases as people that I thought might be important in the life history (i.e. biological parents) turned out to not be as important. Participants were able to discuss those most important events or people without the researcher making assumptions of what those might be.

Finally, as the interview process progressed, several questions were modified and questions were added in line with a grounded theory approach. It was identified early on that individuals in the Delta may be leading in one of the most impoverished areas of the country, but are immensely proud of the things they are able to accomplish. As Falk (2004) notes his notions of poverty and success were affected by interviews with individuals in the black belt. Like many, he and I made certain assumptions about the way success is defined and measured in the area. However, it was evident that the researcher's definitions of success were not similar to the participants. Therefore, questions about how the leader defines and measures success (since statistical measures of poverty are unlikely to change very much during their tenure as elected officials) were explored. These findings are not discussed within this dissertation study and will be analyzed at a later date. Next, it became clearer how important social capital and spiritual capital were in the election process. Individuals in these rural towns relied heavily on the networks of their churches. However, what was unclear, and largely is still, is at what point does spiritual capital and relationships translate into usable social capital and even political capital for individuals to be elected. How are these capitals different and how do they operate in the process? Questions were added to further explore this toward the end of the initial interview process. The attempt was made to contact those who were finished with the interview process to further explore this area. Attempting to have long conversations on the telephone over this issue did not work well as participants were often times interrupted or it was clear they were multitasking. However, through the process there was yet another area identified that needs further research attention.

Finally, the work entailed in grounded theory by listening to previous interviews before conducting new interviews was beneficial. By preparing in such a way, I was able to identify further entry points to discuss race, class and gender. For example, in terms of interviewing women, it became clear that conversations were needed about how the role of mother played into the decision making process to run for office. It also became clear early on that, for women, the support at home (i.e. husband or male significant other) was often times not present. It became important to explore both the professional aspect and personal aspect of how gender works in these situations. This approach also helped identify what was missing in certain stories in terms of gender. Most notably is that discussion of the role of the wife in the election process as well as how being an elected official has impacted home life was often times left out of the conversation by men. Thus, the researcher attempted to question men about the involvement of spouses.

In terms of confidentiality, participants signed an informed consent the day of the interview. All names, county names and other such identifying information have been removed. Because only eleven of the eighteen counties traditionally known as the Delta were used, it makes the ability to potentially identify an individual more difficult.

Approach to Analysis

During the research process, interviews were recorded and notes were made. The interviews were then transcribed. This process took approximately four months. The analysis started with approximately three hundred and ninety pages of transcription. Since the research framework included grounded theory, some sensitizing concepts were used in the initial analysis. These included finding those conversations that dealt with issues of race, class and gender.

First, the data were coded in terms of the life course (i.e. when events occurred) including childhood, youth, and adulthood. These sections of data were taken and placed together in order to get a better sense of similarities and differences within the life course. It was at this point concepts such as social institutions (church, family, community, etc.) started to emerge as important influences in the leadership identities and stories of the individuals. The data was then organized around the idea of producing a life history and leadership story. For each of the nineteen interviews, a story was written. This included important experiences in childhood, youth, the campaign experience as well as the role of mayor following their election.

This was a time consuming endeavor, but allowed for a much deeper sense of how the stories the participants chose to tell were linked and created the identity of “leader” they put forth. Moving away from simply coding across categories looking for similarities and differences allowed for another layer of understanding for the researcher. The process of writing their story was also in a sense problematic. In an attempt to make sure the voices of the individual participants were present in the analysis, I became almost too close to the data to interpret it in a sociologically meaningful way. I had to take a step back once again in order to gain perspective on the process at hand. Following the writing of the leadership stories, these were coded for experiences that were impacted by race, gender and social class. These categories provided a way for the researcher to once again embrace the analytical process that needed to happen in the data.

At that point, several other areas were recognized that were ripe for analysis. Data provided insight into the capital resources candidates felt were necessary for election in the Mississippi Delta. Mayors also discussed in great detail challenges of

rural leadership. Finally, participants also shared the ways in which they define and measure success when leading in an area that shows little statistical improvement in national studies such as the U.S. Census. However, the decision was made to limit the analysis for the dissertation to the idea of leadership as a socially constructed process with the impact of social institutions, race, social class and gender. These other findings will be explored further in future work.

Methodological and Analytical Considerations and Limitations

This methodology brings forth several considerations in terms of using experience fashioned through the life history interview. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) point out the following about using stories of experience:

“Stories people tell about themselves are interesting not only for the events and characters they describe but also for something in the construction of the stories themselves. How individuals recount their histories...shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. ...they are a means by which identities may be fashioned” (p. 1).

Further, they point out people offer accounts of their lives that are shaped by the “norms of discourse” in which they operate. They note a life story or history is an organization of experience. As Riessman (1993) argues, “Meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal” (p. 15).

Pickering (2008) points out that experience in itself is never fully “pure or transparent” (p. 19). Riessman (1993) argues “All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly” (p. 15). Experience is always a process of interpretation in terms of providing insight into what the experience means in light of the contextual location of the individual. Balancing the agency of the individual and the power of the structure is an important consideration in using stories as a means of

analysis. One must not overly emphasize the power of structure to dictate choice or fall too far on the other end of the spectrum overemphasizing the active agent (Pickering, 2008).

Another consideration is situated and mediated experience. As Pickering (2008) points out much of what is received by subjects is not from a local source rather through sources such as the media. He notes,

“We have to recognize that the media are an intrinsic, regularly experienced feature of that ground, influencing how people see the local world around them and interpret events on their own doorstep, as well as their views of cultural difference and their sense of connectedness” (p. 25).

This is of particular importance to the analysis of this data. Many of the individuals did not directly participate in events linked to the Civil Rights Movement, but their leadership experiences are mediated through this movement. For example, participants discussed the importance of figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. They also note the importance of the written works and media coverage of these individuals. Experience can be situated as both process and product. Individuals are informed by past actions in their current stream of action. This is a process of gaining knowledge and understanding from everyday life that will contribute to future assessments of experience (Pickering, 2008).

When using life histories the question of “truth” arises. How does the researcher know the participant is “telling the truth?” In fact, this question was posed by a committee member prior to undertaking the research. It was indeed an important question. Often times in the social sciences there are questions of whether an outsider can truly access the population—particularly a seemingly white woman accessing

African Americans or even males in general. Will the population be open and forthcoming in their responses to the outsider?

First, like Falk (2004) who also was asked a similar question regarding his work in the black belt of the South, it was never felt the participant was deliberately telling the researcher “what they wanted to hear.” The mayors seemed to take pride and enthusiasm in discussing their life and leadership experiences. In fact, often times while waiting on the participant to arrive others in the building knew why I was there and discussed how excited the mayor was to be asked to participate. This not only included the gate keeping secretaries, but in some instances also the county inmates who were scheduled to work for city hall! This group of mayors, most often, had never been asked to participate in a research study. As mentioned previously, they are the generation after the Civil Rights leaders who have often been interviewed in the Mississippi Delta.

Next, Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) frame the issue of truth within the context of “cultural representation, the object of study is not the “true” event, as it might have been recorded by a panel of disinterested observers.” (p. 3). “Truth” in the realist sense, thus, is not the goal. What is of interest is the “construction of that event within a personal and social history” (p. 3). Further, this research is based on the leaders’ interpretation of what happened during their experiences of leadership and what lead them to leadership. As Haraway (1991) notes no one account is a “god’s eye view.” Not all points of view of a given leadership, electoral or community experience are represented at any one time. Within these interpretations of an event, there are contested claims to the idea of the “truth” about the experience.

For example, only in one case was data collected from consecutive mayors. These two individuals ran against each other twice. In the first instance, the white male won over the African American male and in the second the African American won. But, the accounts of these two mayors about the “same” election experience were very interesting to compare. Mayor Lay’s (white male) account of the first election was that he was lucky to even have won. He discussed how the white residents were not ready to elect a black man as mayor. He detailed strategic mistakes he felt the opponent made. Mayor Lay discussed in great detail the racial tensions present during both elections. During the first election, he notes that whites were not ready to elect a black male and turned out in full force to support him. However, he discusses the changes in the community during his term as mayor that led to the election of the first black male. He believed that whites saw that, with the demographics of the city, the election of a black person was inevitable. Thus, in the next election they just did not care and largely did not vote or voted for Mayor Riddle as they saw him as the best alternative. In the recollection of Mayor Riddle (black male), the tensions of race did not come into his story. Rather his story focused on the community wanting change in the leadership structure. It was clear he meant the black community, but never discussed any of the tension that Mayor Lay sensed during the process. Rather Mayor Riddle’s conversation focused on his ability to convey a message of hope which he felt led to his election.

The point of the discussion is that validating the “truthfulness” of the claims made in the leadership and life stories is not the goal. Granted, if one of the participants tried to make an outrageous claim such as they had been governor of Mississippi, I would have

had to engage in validating that statement. However, we are interested in the interpretation of the event and thus, “fact checking” the experience makes little sense.

Another approach entirely may be taken with the idea of truth within this research. I am interested in the presentation of self the leader provides in both their life history and experiences as a leader. Goffman (1959) argues that the belief of an individual in terms of his or her reality is important in this presentation of self. The individual will work to show and maintain this impression of reality. Goffman also points out that there are two extremes in terms of impression management. On the one end, the individual is “sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (p. 17). He further states, “only the sociologist or socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the ‘realness’ of what is presented” (p. 17). On the other end of the impression management continuum is the individual who does not believe in his routine or presentation and has no concern that the “self” he or she puts forth to others is true or accurate. As Goffman points out this presentation of self may please the individual in terms of his or her deception or the individual may feel this presentation is for the best of the group or community.

But, Goffman also argues that the performance we present may be the self we desire to live up to. He states, “In the end our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons” (p. 20). Further, “When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part” (Goffman, 1959 p. 242).

Rather than determining truth in a situation this research considers the self the individual puts forth through the stories told in the interview process. Do they speak of self as an active agent in the process of constructing their reality? How do they speak of important structures such as race, class and gender in the construction of self? How is the self of “leader” constructed? What other factors were influential in the construction of the self they put forth?

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of how traditional leadership research has been conducted. The debates in the field regarding quantitative versus qualitative methods were discussed. The overall approach to data collection and analysis were discussed. Finally, the limitations to the approach were outlined. It is also important to note the ways in which this study is similar and different to the body of work on leadership.

First, this research is different in several ways. Where the traditional, mainstream literature on leadership utilizes managers of corporations as the sample this study focuses on elected officials. The main focus is on community leadership rather than leadership for corporations or managements. This study is also not concerned with effectiveness. Most often leadership research is focused on the effectiveness of the individual and leave out how social factors that may or may not be present in the professional world of the person impacts their notion and practice of leadership. This study considers both the personal and professional world of the individual as important in the construction and practice of leadership. This study also differs from the work of rural sociologists on leadership. Most often that work has focused on community structure in the form of

networks as well as power. This study focuses on structures. But, it differs in the sense that it seeks to understand the structures (i.e. race, class and gender) that have influenced the individual who works in the larger community network structures which other researchers have explored. Finally, few studies consider leadership as socially constructed. Many studies focus heavily on the educational aspect that can teach leadership skills. This is an important area of leadership and even much of my past work focuses on teaching leadership education. However, the leader enters the leadership education with experiences that even affect how the education is received. Therefore, exploring leadership as socially constructed using race, class and gender and what impacts this process can be important for leadership education programs. The implications of this research for leadership education are discussed in the conclusions.

Chapter 3: An Overview of the Mississippi Delta

Introduction

The Mississippi Delta region includes 18 counties extending from DeSoto County in the north to Warren County at its southern boundary (Figure 1). It is approximately 200 miles long and 80 miles at its widest point. The region currently has about 490,000 people with half the population African American and half Caucasian. US Census data indicate that the region has lost about 24,000 residents in the past decade. Furthermore, Mississippi's second congressional district comprises most of the Delta and is the third poorest district in the nation (Lovell, 2004; Tabb & Montesi, 2001).

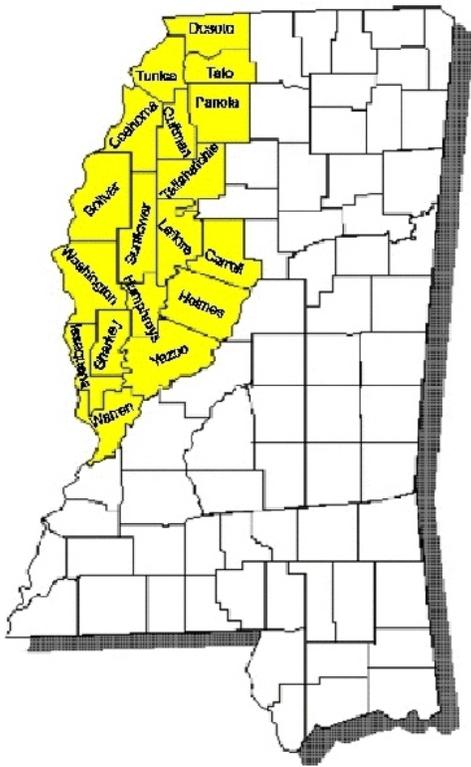


Figure 1. Map of the Mississippi Delta

Robinson (2002) argues there are many contradictions that characterize the Mississippi Delta. The lack of educational training and high attrition rates from high school and college is a major concern for residents of the Delta even though the region

has quality institutions of higher learning. There is substantial human and financial capital within the region; yet too often, it is exported to and reinvested in other regions. The region's labor force is highly integrated, yet many institutions such as religious organizations, civic groups, recreational programs and public schools are largely racially segregated. Historically, those in the Mississippi Delta have high levels of collaboration in areas such as flood control and agricultural matters; however, collaboration around social needs is harder to facilitate (Lovell, 2004; Mid-South Delta Leaders Proposal, 2002).

The Mississippi Delta is rich in cultural heritage, but does not capitalize fully on this in terms of tourism and economic development. Other challenges in the Mississippi Delta include low access to technology, low credit attainment, poor housing, poor healthcare, and jobs with low wages and few benefits (Lovell, 2004; Mid-South Delta Leaders Proposal, 2002).

This chapter outlines the history of the Mississippi Delta. Much of this history is constructed on race. It is not meant to be an exhaustive history, but rather lay the context in which the leaders in this study come from and in which their experiences are constructed. The plantation economy is considered as well as the Civil Rights Movement. The chapter also considers the Delta in the 21st Century.

Some Personal Reflections about Mississippi and the Delta

As a teenager moving from an Indian reservation in Western New York to the state of Mississippi, I learned a lot about how race is constructed differently depending on place. In New York, I was considered a “wrong sider” when it came to race. My father is Seneca Indian and my mother is white. On the reservation and in school I was

neither white nor Seneca and the question of identity was problematic for many years. My parent's interracial marriage impacted my social relationships on the reservation a great deal. People in the area knew what I was and I knew my racial or ethnic identity was not clear cut.

However, at thirteen I moved to Mississippi. I learned that just by crossing state lines, and in particularly moving into the South, my perceived racial and ethnic identity became white. People automatically perceived me as white and as such I moved into circles where I was privy to open conversations about race. I learned that racially charged jokes flew off the tips of young tongues. I was able to observe the interactions among blacks and whites. I saw that we sat at different lunch tables in the school cafeteria. We lived on different sides of town. I was warned not to stray into "Black town." We had different social activities. We went to different churches.

I also learned after moving that my bi-racial parentage seemingly did not matter in Mississippi. Sadly, it did not matter because the "other" part of me was not black. Had my father been black, it would have mattered a great deal to those who became my teenage friends. I learned this first hand when, at seventeen, a white friend was engaged to marry a black man. Several of my friends were not allowed to go to the wedding simply because of the interracial relationship. I remember asking a friend, "How come it matters so much that Ann and Marcus are getting married and no one thinks twice about the fact my parents did the same thing? My father is a different race and yet your parents accept me." I remember her response clearly, "Your father is not black. It is not right what they are doing. Races should not mix." What she clearly meant was whites and blacks should not mix.

I continued to see similar scenarios played out throughout my college career. This was yet another chapter in my understanding of race relations and different cultures in Mississippi when I moved into the Delta. In the Delta, more so than just living in Mississippi, I learned about the effects of the Civil Rights Movement and the still influential land owners. I learned that it was the norm for white children to attend private academies and the black children to attend the public schools. I learned that whites and blacks could live in the same zip code and yet inhabit entirely different communities. It was much different than the separation I had even learned about in living in my county of Mississippi.

I became close friends with a black woman during my Masters experience. Her entire life she attended the public schools and then went on to attend a historically black college. I was her first “white” friend and our time at Delta State University was the first time she sat in an interracial classroom. We got our share of looks and stares as we ate out together in Cleveland, MS. In fact, the woman who worked at the deli we most often frequented could not stand it after several months of us coming in together. She had to ask, “What, are ya’ll roommates or something?” My friend got the devious look in her eye that she is well known for and said, “No, we’re cousins.” I’ll never forget the shocked look on the woman’s face. But, it seems she had to ask because our close friendship was not the norm.

In the South race still clearly matters. Race is seen in black and white. The relationships among people are still largely structured around this concept of race. It unconsciously enters conversations when talking about new people. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I met so and so the other day. He’s black [or insert white].”

However, when you consider the legacy which a plantation economy leaves as well as the region's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, it is not hard to see why people still interact in the ways they do concerning race. Falk (2004) says of his study on the black belt, "In much of the rural South, one thing is axiomatic: race and everyday life are intermingled to such an extent that sorting one from the other is nearly impossible" (p. 17).

The Plantation Economy

Austin (2006) discusses the plantation economy in terms of two distinct phases in regard to the sharecropping system. The first phase was characterized by the unbridled control that wealthy landowners had over decision making and blacks in the Mississippi Delta. The first phase started in the mid 1860's (Rogers, 2006). During this time white elites relied on black labor to cultivate the cotton crops. It was hard labor in harsh conditions. Black laborers were fully dependent upon the landowner as white elites controlled access to food, housing and farming equipment. These actions impoverished blacks and made it easier to control the population. Black labor benefited the landowner with cheap and easily controlled labor (Rogers, 2006) and left the working blacks with little but debt. Brown & Webb (2007) quote the poet Langston Hughes, "When the cotton's picked and the work is done boss man takes the money and we get none" (p. 182).

The first phase also was characterized by an opposition to federal aid or unions organizing in the region. The fear was that these two avenues would force higher wages and improve working conditions for black sharecroppers. White elites also feared that accepting federal dollars would give the government an opening to intervene in state

politics. Most notably, white elites feared the interference of federal government in issues of civil rights (Austin, 2006).

The second phase began with acceptance of financial aid following the floods of 1916, 1920, and 1927. Further, the boll weevil outbreak on crops also forced acceptance of federal dollars. The Great Depression forced the hands of white elites to accept the funds. But, what the elites found was that the acceptance of funds did not change the situation of blacks in the Delta. Since elites controlled the dollars, they were able to further the dependency of blacks upon the landowner. For example, those administering the Red Cross programs charged blacks for the free supplies most often resulting in additional debt owed to the elite (Austin, 2006).

The second phase in the sharecropping system saw the introduction of mechanized farming. Elites no longer needed as many laborers. In 1967 a federal minimum wage law meant to ensure a fair wage far from accomplished its goals. Elites believed the minimum wage provided blacks with too a high a salary and therefore, hired fewer laborers and cut working hours (Austin, 2006). This period saw the continual reduction of farm labor and sharecroppers. In a highly agricultural region, this reduction meant blacks no longer had opportunities for work. This started what is commonly known as “brain drain” as more educated and particularly younger blacks left the region in what is known as the “Great Migration” (Austin, 2006).

Throughout these phases, other methods were used to also subordinate the black population in the Mississippi Delta. The violence of Jim Crow laws created a structure of fear. Rogers (2006) argues that

“Many, if not the majority of sharecropping and tenant farming families lived in conditions of chronic social trauma and structural violence that

compounded widespread economic exploitation and poverty with recurring vigilante, Klan, and state-sanctioned authorities' assaults on individuals and groups of African Americans. The systems of segregation and sharecropping thus produced conditions in which structural violence and collective violence and exploitation "normalized" a constant fear of complete destitution and white terrorism among thousands of black farmers which worked the famously rich Delta lands" (p. 20).

This system effectively limited the African American capacity for "agency, ambition, and independence" (Rogers, 2006 p. 21).

Mississippi led the nation in the lynching of African Americans. From 1889-1945 Mississippi had 476 of the 3,786 recoded lynchings. Actual figures are hard to determine as Rogers (2006) points out, because many lynchings went unrecorded and the total may be higher. The Delta in particular had its share of these brutal acts as Sunflower, Coahoma, Washington and Bolivar Counties recorded a total of 44 during this time (Rogers, 2006). Suspected lynchings were occurring as late as the 1980's in Tallahatchie County where many of these were labeled "suicide" (Marable, 1996). Blacks also feared "the mob crew" which

"was sometimes the Ku Klux Klan, sometimes a group of friends of an aggrieved party. Such crowds murdered Mississippi blacks for a number of reasons: allegedly for the "rape" of a white woman, or for "reckless eyeballing"—looking at a white woman the wrong way—or for killing a white, or for disrespecting a white adult or child or for acquiring too much property, or for any kind of political assertion—like organizing a NAACP chapter or attempting to vote" (Rogers, 2006 p. 37).

Authors such as Austin (2006), Rogers (2006) and Brown & Webb (2007) point out the use of such acts provided a set of rules which blacks were induced to follow in terms of their treatment of whites. From Austin's work interviewees discussed rules such as "Avoid white areas. Don't associate with them. Call white kids Mr. and Ms. after age 13

and don't go to the front door of a white person's house" (p. 29). Further, the participants in this research shared similar stories about "rules."

"In 1955, I was 14 years old. Emmett Till's uncle was married to my auntie. He came down that summer to stay with Uncle. That was a very serious time for young black kids because they said young black men were an endangered species. I remember one time I bought a shirt. I had worked the plantation and it was an olive color and a Hawaiian shirt. On it had a lady dressed in a sea grass skirts and a banana on her chest. As if she was hulaing. I asked this guy that I knew if I could catch a ride back from the movie. He said yes, you can ride back with me. I said, thank you sir. But, when it came time for us to go home and he asked me what I was wearing. I told him I bought it at the store. He looked at me and said I can't wear that shirt and ride in the back of his truck. He said, "Don't you know they just killed that boy over that white woman?" He thought the woman on my shirt was a white woman, not a Hawaiian woman. He was afraid of that. So, I pulled the shirt off and wore it home the wrong way. That was just some of what blacks had to go through at that time" (Mayor Hughes).

The total control of white elites during this period provided little opportunity for blacks. The few blacks who were able to open stores or do work outside of farming were often the target of violence. They were also the targets of resentment from other blacks. While there were few black owned businesses during this time the success of these businesses is debatable (Webb & Brown, 2007). However, starting in the mid 1960's several things began to happen in which blacks began to organize and protest for civil and voting rights.

Civil Rights Movement

While in other parts of the South activities such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, student sit-ins and Freedom Rides were happening, in Mississippi little of this made a difference (Brown & Webb, 2007). Cobb (1992) argues that even with the conversation in Washington and other places turning to talk of civil rights it was business as usual in the Mississippi Delta. He notes, "In the Delta of the early 1960s the white planter's word

was still the law, and even his most audacious pronouncements stood as unchallenged statements of fact” (p. 231). Planters were attempting to show the outside world that blacks and whites alike were happy with the situation in the Mississippi Delta. In one recorded incident, a Sunflower County planter gave an interview along with the blacks that worked on his land. It went as follows:

“A tenant, Big Lee, denied that conditions were by any means unsatisfactory in the Delta; “It ain’t what the rackets out. It isn’t as bad here as people are saying. I been to Chicago. I got children there. I can’t stand it. I likes it here fine.” “Big Lee don’t have nothing to do with civil rights,” the planter asserts, and added, “He don’t want for anything.” After Big Lee agreed, the planter concluded the interview with a cheery summary: “They’re happy. We’re happy. Everybody’s happy here” (Cobb, 1992 p. 231).

Efforts to organize and protest the Delta situation in the early days were crushed by white elites. The efforts were mainly those of the NAACP attempting desegregation petitions and voter registration drives. At the time, the NAACP in Mississippi favored a non-protest approach that differed greatly from the approaches of younger civil rights workers who entered the state in the 1960s with groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In Mississippi, these two groups merged and became the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Their efforts, in the beginning, stalled as well. In attempts to register blacks in Greenwood, MS many of the workers were subjected to verbal and physical abuse as well as intimidation tactics. Many were jailed in the Greenwood attempt. Dittmer (1995) argues, “The civil rights movement in Mississippi stalled on every front by the end of summer 1963.”

However, the Freedom Vote of 1963 and the organization of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) became symbolic victories that furthered action by

blacks in the state as well as the Delta. The Freedom Vote was a mock election which included activist Aaron Henry as a gubernatorial candidate and Edwin King, a white chaplain, as lieutenant governor. Robert Moses, Delta activist, argued that the Freedom Vote was to “show that if Negroes had the right to vote without fear of physical violence and other reprisals, they would do so” (Cobb, 1992 p. 233). More than eighty thousand “freedom ballots” were cast proving such a point. These activities lead to the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party. This organization was formed as a challenge to the white political dominance in the state. The group sent a mostly black delegation to the national Democratic convention in Atlantic City in 1964 (Cobb, 1992).

It was at the convention that the national spotlight was put on Mississippi and the brutality suffered by blacks in the state. Fannie Lou Hamer gave testimony through an interview about her experiences of brutality (Cobb, 1992). Her interview gained national prominence despite the attempts of national leaders to downplay her experience and even held competing press conferences. The National Democratic Party also responded by offering the MFDP an essentially non-binding agreement that from that point forward all conventions would be integrated. However, the leaders of the MFDP, including Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry, would not concede. Hamer is quoted as saying, “a token of rights on the back row that we get in Mississippi. We didn’t come all this way for that mess again” (Cobb, 1992 p. 235).

In response to the MFDP, many whites continued the brutal methods to try and subdue what they saw as an uprising and an attempt to take away their way of life. From police chiefs in Clarksdale, MS to mayors in Greenwood, MS these community leaders used their offices to attempt to frighten blacks away from attempting desegregation or

voting activities (Cobb, 1992). Hence, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had little effect on the lives of African Americans in the Delta immediately following their passage (Cobb, 1992).

White businesses that attempted to desegregate or even doctors who attempted to see black patients at hospitals were black balled and subjected to violence as well. Other white business owners refused to serve the black population by changing their establishments, particularly restaurants, from “businesses” to “clubs.” Even though laws had changed it had little effect on the behaviors or attitudes. Whites simply retreated to their country clubs and created separate community structures including the introduction of the academy system¹ into the Delta.

Wirt (1997), in probably one of the best studies of social change in the Mississippi Delta, noted that, as of the 1970’s, attitudes about race and politics still resembled the Old South. But, he argues that due to changes in laws (most notably the Civil Rights and voting legislation in 1964 and 1965) the traditional culture of the Old South was forced to reckon with a new emergent culture that included black participation in all aspects of community life including the political arena. He argues that it was at this point the seeds were planted in terms of cultural changes that the region would experience. He also argues that these changes were only realized in the generation following those directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, in the 1970’s Mississippi boasted about its progressive nature in terms of electing blacks. In 1977 Mississippi had 295 elected black officials. However, a closer analysis reveals that those elected during this time were from predominately black towns and in particularly small,

¹ The academy system refers to the separate private school systems whites established after integration. These schools remain today.

rural towns (Marable, 1996). These were certainly not powerful positions that could effectively address the problems of black Delta residents such as poverty, low educational attainment and an increasing focus on economic development.

The 1970's also saw an influx of federal dollars in terms of infrastructure investment in the region. Dollars were invested in southern freeways that enabled the South to participate in the economy in a new way. The improved roads were the catalyst for businesses to take advantage of the South's low taxes and weak welfare. New industry in small rural towns emerged as well as larger industrial sites in urban Southern areas (Wirt, 1997).

By the 1980's opportunities were increasing for Delta blacks. A new black professional middle class was emerging. Many were finding opportunities for education though the path was not traditional. The effort was tremendous as often times these individuals held full time work while completing their college education. Many entered work in the social services and public sector (Duncan et al, 1999). However, the industrial up tick of the 1970's was beginning to decline in the 1980's. The few plants the rural South had managed to obtain were closing. Further, leaders found it difficult to attract industries to the Mississippi Delta due to a workforce with low educational attainment (Wirt, 1997). However, this period did see an in-migration of blacks whose families had left during the 1940's and 1950's. They commented on seeing a changed Delta though found many of the issues they dealt with in the larger cities such as drugs, crime and poverty (Cobb, 1992).

By the 1990's the presence of federal dollars was evident in the region. However, these dollars did little to alleviate poverty and produced a perception of blacks as not wanting to work. Cobb (1992) notes

“As of 1991 Clarksdale, MS whites saw the town's black community as a 'welfare colony floating on a tide of federal transfer payments, sapped of the will to work.' However, by no means all the Delta's recipients of public subsidies were black. A white developer of low income properties conceded as much when he observed that, 'if you took away the farmer's government subsidy payment, the welfare, and the unemployment check, this whole place would blow away' (p. 329-330).

Economically speaking the Delta did see the rise of catfish farming as a means of economic development. However, this industry has seen its share of issues including the decline in demand for product as other regions also raise catfish, labor disputes and accusations of poor working conditions. In 1991 Greenville, MS saw the closing of its Schwinn Bicycle Plant that started to focus more on its overseas operations (Cobb, 1992). The growth areas overall in the rural South in the 1990s included wholesale/retail trade, finance, real estate, insurance and most of all service industries (Beaulieu, 2001). Despite this, the economic outlook for the region was not positive during the 1990s.

However, Wirt (1997) notes changes in the reality of race relations in the region. In his interviews he notes an awareness of blacks and whites that they are living in a time of change in terms of race relations. He argues “Living with change in any era is painful because our old self composed of thought and action is compelled to alter; we must examine the old reality in light of a new one thrust upon us” (p. 213). He notes these changes stem from public policy that, in turn, has affected new attitudes and interracial connections.

The 1990's also signaled other changes in race relations. In 1993 there were church burnings in Southwest Mississippi. State and local government worked swiftly to solve the crime. These churches were rebuilt by interracial coalitions that many community residents in that area noted with pride. The 1990s also saw an increase in investigations and prosecutions of slain civil rights leaders. Most notably in the 1990s was the Beckwith trial in Panola County. Beckwith was tried and convicted of murdering civil rights leader Medgar Evers by an interracial jury. These actions had mixed reactions. Blacks were in favor of opening the cases and trying for justice. Some whites however, saw the opening of the cases and trials as opening of old wounds (Wirt, 1997; Brown & Webb, 2007).

The Role of the Church and Family in the Mississippi Delta

Religion has long been considered an important institution in the rural south. Hunt and Hunt (2001) found that the “rural south produces distinctive patterns of church attendance across racial lines, perhaps reflecting the legacy of segregation and the central importance of the church in rural community life” (p. 605). In fact, they found that being rural is more predictive of than being black in rural church attendance.

But, research suggests that the role of the church is different for African Americans and Caucasians. In terms of religion, many of the denominations within the south, both white and black, can be considered conservative Protestants (CP). However, Woodberry and Smith (1998) argue that black CP's differ from white CP's politically and are separated institutionally. They further note the African American experience of oppression shaped political beliefs different than white CP's. Finally, researchers such as Guth (1996) note that the place of the church within politics is different for white CP's

than black CP's. Within the African American community the church has long been considered the backbone of the community (McClerking et al. 2005; Barnes, 2005). Further, the role of the church to stimulate political participation is well documented (Barnes, 2005; McClerking et al., 2005; Hunt & Hunt, 2001). Harris (1999) argues that black churches are effective in encouraging political participation because they aid in the development of civic skills and psychological resources that "fuel political activism" (McClerking et al., 2005 p. 723).

The research on the African American church focuses on many areas, but two are of particular importance for the research at hand. The first was mentioned above. Often African American churches create programs that teach civic engagement skills (McClerking, 2005). Next, Barnes (2005) set out to explore how the cultural tool kit that is specific to the church helps individuals interpret the world around them. Barnes (2005) notes "Black church members have been shown to develop symbols such as rituals, songs, sayings, sacred meanings and biblical stories to help them interpret events" (p. 969). Scripture is used to encourage civic engagement and prayer is often cited as a means of framing a situation. Prayer groups are shown to also influence civic engagement (Barnes, 2005). Finally, Black church culture often conveys a set of values as Sawyer (2001) outlines below.

"Black religious tradition holds as its ultimate values communalism, welfare of the collectivity, the integral relation of the spiritual and the material, and the moral obligation to pursue social-political concretization of the theological principles of equality, justice and inclusiveness" (p. 67).

Nationally, within the conservative Protestant movement, there are numerous denominations that do not agree on any one set of labels or beliefs (Woodberry & Smith, 1998). In fact, terms such as "fundamentalist", "evangelical", and "born-again" are used

interchangeably in the research making it difficult to separate the various differences between groups. However, Woodberry and Smith (1998) provide the best overview on the conservative Protestant movement that is prevalent in the South. It was one of the only pieces I reviewed that focused specifically on white conservative Protestants and studied regional differences in beliefs. Therefore, their work is relied on heavily in this section.

Woodberry and Smith (1998) note that southern white CP's have their own unique religious style and network of institutions. They also note that these CP's also tend to share beliefs that are more socially conservative. In terms of beliefs, Southern CP's tend to resist the inclusion of women in the overall leadership structures within the church. They tend to favor more traditional gender roles (Woodberry and Smith, 1998). Hill (1980) notes that overall the South has stayed relatively religiously homogeneous in these beliefs.

In terms of the influence of the church, Hill (2008) notes that the messages received in these churches are about being “the right sort of church person and citizen.” Holding strong to strict interpretations of the Bible, they consult the Bible for the interpretations of what this means. Woodberry and Smith (1998) note that white CP's “appear to prioritize the conservation of what is in their view the moral basis of the common good” (p. 41).

There is little emphasis in the actual churches for involvement in political activism. There are, of course, large organizations that “represent” the agenda of the religious right, but on a weekly basis political activism is not preached from the pulpit. Guth (1996) found that fifty percent of Southern Baptist ministers think that political

activism hurts the church and fear politics will dilute the churches spirituality. Further, Guth also found that fifty percent of Southern Baptist ministers think some within their national leadership have gone too far in mixing politics and religion. Some might note, that findings of fifty percent mean that the other fifty percent believe the opposite. However, Guth's work found that one third of the other fifty percent was not sure whether political activism hurts the church or whether they were too far involved in political activities. So there remains some division over this within the conservative Protestant movement. It is clear from the literature that the use of the church in organizing for political activities differs for African Americans and Whites. This difference is further explored in the discussion of this work.

The Role of Family and African Americans

The analysis found another important piece to this story is the role of family for African Americans. Chatters et al. (2002) note the extended family is an important social institution in the black community. The family helps promote community life for African Americans. Shimkin et al. (1978) noted the role of pseudo kin relationships, reciprocal aid, childcare, household cooperation and aging parent care as important in this support network among African American families. These networks provide a means of support both socially and economically during hard times (Burton, 1992).

In terms of meeting basic needs, Stack (1974) found "alliances between individuals are created around the clock as kin and friends exchange and give and obligate one another (p.32). Goods "swapped" included anything from furniture to cars, food and childcare. These networks were extensive in both scope of who was involved as

well as what was traded. These networks were critical in meeting basic survival needs among those in Stack's work.

Many of the participants in the study at hand note the particular importance of grandparents and older siblings in their upbringing. Stack (1974) notes that often times children born to younger members of the family were "raised up" by older sisters, grandparents or aunts and that individual became "mama" (p. 47). In fact, it was not uncommon in her study that participants told stories of living with other family members during economically tough situations.

Stack (1974) probably provides one of the best ethnographic pieces on the role of family, networks and social support in African American families. Though the situations and help needed in this study is no where near the dire circumstances of those families in Stack's work, the work still provides important insights into the importance of family and networks to African Americans. Many of the stories shared from early childhood as well as the reliance on kin networks once they become leaders reflect the importance of family. The networks and family relationships are furthered connected in the analysis and discussion chapters.

The 21st Century Mississippi Delta: Statistical Overview

This section provides a statistical overview of the Mississippi Delta including population changes, income, educational attainment and a view of businesses in the region. Two sources were used to construct these statistics. First, the US Census State and County Facts website was used to compile those numbers specifically related to the research counties. These figures are estimates from 2007. The second source is the Delta Task Force 2009 Report.

Table 1: Population, Race/Ethnic Composition and Educational Attainment

County	Population	Percent change	White	Black	Other	HS Diploma	BA or higher
Bolivar	38,352	-5.6	33.4	65.4	1.8	65.3	18.8
Carroll	10,367	-3.7	64.5	34.9	1.4	66.6	10.9
Coahoma	28,420	-7.2	25.3	73.3	0.8	62.2	16.2
DeSoto	154,748	44.4	77.2	20.2	5.4	81.6	14.3
Holmes	20,595	-4.7	18.2	80.8	1.3	59.7	11.2
Humphreys	10,393	-7.30	26.5	73.6	0.4	53.7	11.6
Issaquena	1,805	-20.6	39.3	60.1	0.1	58.8	7.1
Leflore	35,752	-5.8	28.2	70.5	0.7	61.9	15.9
Panola	35,660	4.0	51.4	47.8	1.7	63.5	10.8
Quitman	9,289	-8.2	30	69.1	0.4	55.1	10.6
Sharkey	5,851	-11.1	30.6	68.3	0.6	60.6	12.6
Sunflower	31,833	-7.4	27.1	71.8	0.8	59.3	12.0
Tallahatchie	13,798	-7.4	39	60.1	0.6	54.5	10.9
Tate	27,176	7.1	67.6	31.4	1.5	71.7	12.3
Tunica	10,419	12.9	26.6	71.9	0.9	60.5	9.1
Warren	48,087	-3.1	51.2	47.2	2.3	77.0	20.8
Washington	58,007	-7.9	31.3	67.1	0.9	66.5	16.4
Yazoo	28,464	1.1	43.5	55.3	5.3	65.0	11.8
State of Mississippi	2,910,540	2.3	60.9	37.1	1.3	72.9	16.9

Source: US Census State and County Quick Facts Website (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28000.html>)

The majority of counties used in this research lost population with Issaquena County having the highest percent change at almost twenty-one percent. The majority of the population is black while that is not the case for the state of Mississippi as a whole. Many of these counties are between sixty and seventy percent black. In terms of education, compared to the Mississippi average, Delta counties face a far lower high school attainment rate. In terms of those holding college degrees, the figures, except for Warren and Bolivar Counties, are below the state average.

Incomes within the counties are also much lower than the state average. Further, poverty is nearly ten percent higher in each county than the state average. The Delta Task Force (2009) notes that from 2001-2007 unemployment in the Delta averaged between eight and ten percent. However, they report in 2008 the average for these counties is between ten and seventeen percent with blacks suffering unemployment rates three times higher than whites. Consistent with Beaulieu's (2001) findings, the largest growth sectors in the Delta economy from 2000 to 2009 have been low paying, non-benefit service sector jobs. The "good" service sector jobs typically pay between ten and thirteen dollars in the Delta, which is near poverty levels. However, they note that many only pay minimum wage to eight dollars. Though minimum wage in Mississippi has received several increases over the last few years, it still produces incomes below poverty level. July 1, 2009 minimum wage will increase to \$7.25.

Table 2 also provides the total number of business firms in the counties and the percentage of those that are either minority or female owned. Some counties show nearly fifty percent of minority owned firms. However, most show fewer than one hundred of the firms located in the county are minority owned. In terms of female owned firms,

Quitman County has the highest percent at almost forty-five with three counties having less than 100 of the total number of firms female owned.

In terms of current research on the social aspects of the region from 2005-2009, little is published at the moment. Whether this is because the work has not yet made it to a publishable stage or it is not being conducted is unknown. Therefore, this section will rely on the work of Austin (2006) as well as my observations and experiences during these years. It should be noted that even Austin's work stopped relatively early in the 2000s. Therefore, her work missed the elections of blacks and women to powerful positions such as those interviewed during this research.

Austin (2006) argues that African Americans have had relatively high levels of political incorporation in the Mississippi Delta in the last ten years. Political incorporation theory equates African American political power with the ability to elect blacks and is further discussed in the review of literature. However, she also argues that, though the political incorporation has been high, there are other issues preventing blacks from setting and accomplishing an agenda. She attributes much of this to the fact that many of those blacks elected into position during her research time frame were still in smaller, predominately black communities with limited numbers of blacks being elected to powerful county commissions.

Table 2. Mississippi Delta Income, Poverty and Firms

County	Median Income	Percent below poverty	Total # Firms	Percent Minority Owned Firms	Percent Female Owned Firms
Bolivar	24,258	30.1	2265	42.9	34
Carroll	30,903	20.2	483	F*	F*
Coahoma	23,560	30.6	1617	23.6	21.9
DeSoto	58,581	7.9	8819	4.6	25.3
Holmes	22,700	41.7	1019	S**	13.2
Humphreys	\$20,682	32.7	503	49.1	26.6
Issaquena	21,038	34.7	40	F*	F*
Leflore	22,709	31.6	1849	9.8	17.1
Panola	32,514	28.5	2113	14.2	22.8
Quitman	22,183	30.0	418	53.8	44.7
Sharkey	23,632	32.0	335	F*	F*
Sunflower	23,019	34.3	1340	45.3	38.4
Tallahatchie	24,233	27.1	668	F*	F*
Tate	40,478	15.8	1761	F*	13.2
Tunica	26,413	23.9	507	F*	22.3
Warren	40,263	19.2	3310	9.0	29.2
Washington	25,455	29.5	3809	35	21.6
Yazoo	29,461	30.0	1425	16.1	19.8
State of Mississippi	34278	19.3	187602	13.3	25.1
*Fewer than 100	**Suppressed				

Source: US Census State and County Quick Facts Website (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28000.html>)

This period has also seen a strong interest from outside foundations in terms of improving social conditions. Among the numerous groups that operate in the Delta are the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Dreyfus Health Foundation and Winokur Family Foundation partnering to address health disparities in the region. The Kellogg Foundation has worked in the region under the Mid-South Delta Initiative on issues of community development, community leadership, economic development and youth. However, the region has become jaded by the interest of these outsiders and the fact that little tangible results can be seen from the interventions (Harvey & Beaulieu, 2007).

However, despite these conditions, I have found that elected and grassroots leaders in the Delta are surprisingly optimistic about the future of the region (Lovell, 2008; Hayes & Lovell, 2008). Falk (2006) found similar results in his study of the black belt. These leaders discuss the need to move forward and continue focusing on community and economic development no matter the end result. As mentioned previously, some are jaded by the lack of tangible results (i.e. change in statistics), but participants of this research note that by continuing the work and working on collaborations it builds the social capital and networks that have long been fractured by race.

Conclusion

The Mississippi Delta has seen great shifts in economic and social life throughout its history. Particularly in the last thirty years it has seen great shifts in race relations (Wirt, 1997). In a region where only fifty years ago it was common place for young black men to be thought of as an “endangered species”, blacks are able to participate in local governance. Though their participation is still somewhat limited at the county level,

the Delta has seen the election of a number of blacks (Austin, 2006). However, the region still exhibits many of the characteristics that civil rights workers believe would be alleviated by greater inclusion in the political process. These issues include persistent poverty, low educational attainment and poor health care among others.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Introduction

This analysis considers leadership a socially constructed process. It is constructed through relationships, experiences, and social locations such as race, social class, and gender. Further, this analysis makes the assumption that the construction of leadership is a continual process. The beginning of this process will differ for individuals depending on where they see the leadership story's beginning. For some, that beginning is in childhood as they consider themselves leaders at a young age. For others, the process did not begin until later in life though their experiences in early life are evident in their understandings and practice of leadership. However, what is clear is that no matter the age when the leadership story started there are factors from throughout the life course narrative that affect how individuals construct and practice leadership. Finally, the analysis revealed some differences in these constructions based on race, class and gender.

Next, the analysis focuses on the challenges and opportunities that race, class and gender bring during the campaign process and following their election. It was clear these experiences were shaped by race and gender. Analysis also shows how their experience may be shaped by social class though this was not as explicitly discussed as gender and race. Further, participants were asked to discuss the balance of public and private life. Leadership in the public arena takes time away from the roles of parent and spouse. It was also clear that gender was important in this area.

Finally, this analysis also pays attention to the intersectionalities of race, social class and gender in the construction of leadership. These areas are analyzed to show the intersectionality where it is appropriate. As Collins (1993) argues,

“Race, class and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people’s self-definitions...This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships.” (p. 560-561).

Description of Respondent Demographics

Once again, seven women were interviewed. One was white and the remainder African American. Five white men and seven black men were interviewed for a total of nineteen interviews. The youngest mayor is 42 and the oldest 74. Three are in their forties. Seven are in their fifties; eight are in their sixties and one is 74.

In many cases in the Mississippi Delta, the position of mayor is only considered a part time job—at least in terms of monetary compensation. Therefore, most mayors have occupations in addition to their position as mayor—only three indicated the position of mayor is also their full time job. Two are mayors in the larger cities in the sample area and one is in a financial position to serve as full time mayor for part time compensation. Four are business owners and another four are teachers. However, in terms of the teachers, three of the four only ran for mayor after retiring from the teaching profession. Two are funeral home directors. Two are involved in the legal field. Finally, others work in the prison industry, non-profits and one former mayor is now serving in another elected position. Five men also report serving in the military.

Approximately forty-three percent of interviewees indicated serving in other elected positions prior to running for mayor. These positions were either on the city or county boards such as city council or county supervisors. For the remaining individuals, running for mayor was their first time in the political arena. In terms of tenure as mayor the lengths varied a great deal. Some mayors had only served as many as two years at the

time of the interview and others had served in the position for as many as thirty-seven years. However, sixty-three percent of the respondents were either in their first or second term as mayor.

Six of the seven women interviewed were the first elected female in the position of mayor in their city. One of those was also the first African American elected to the position of mayor. Four of the African American men interviewed were the first black men to be elected to position of mayor in their city.

Social Class and Occupations

In terms of childhood experiences and influences there are similarities among the participants. Most participants (approximately eight-four percent) came from what they considered poor or working class backgrounds. Seven interviewees came from a farming or plantation background. Of this group, six were African American. Two participants noted that their parents later moved into other occupations as demand for manual labor in farming declined. In one instance the parent moved into manufacturing and the other started a funeral home business.

Six mayors placed their parents' field of work as laborers or domestics. In terms of domestic work it included cleaning, working in laundry services and other such jobs. Laborers most often referred to their parents doing odd jobs around the community in maintenance such as plumbing, electrical, and so forth. Of the six, four were African American and two were white. Two African Americans indicated their families were landowners which was rare in their childhood. Of those two, one individual noted the family made a living through business ownership due to their land ownership. The other's parents were laborers but they lived on land that had been passed down.

Education

Overall, the sample is well educated. Approximately seventy-nine percent attended college. Forty-seven percent had a Bachelors Degree and sixteen percent had completed graduate level work in the form of a Masters Degree or law school. The remainder completed an Associate's degree. Sixteen percent of participants had high school diplomas. The educational level of this sample is unique to the region overall. The percent of high school graduates (percent of persons age 25+) for the eleven county sample area is 59.85 percent. The percent of people with a bachelor's degree or higher (percent of persons 25+) is 12.84 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, accessed 2/17/2009).

Only three participants noted that one or both of their parents were college graduates. Of the three mayors, two were African Americans. Most noted their parent's education was cut short due to the labor demand of farming at the time. However, all African Americans interviewed noted the importance that either their parents or community members placed on gaining an education which is evident in the educational attainment percentages presented above. It became a goal of many of them to achieve in this area as they saw it as a necessary part of growth for African Americans. In fact, sixty-six percent of the African Americans interviewed relayed some story of how educators, experiences or parental encouragement in regard to education influenced them and ten of the twelve African Americans interviewed have a college education. For example, Mayor Ray shared the following story:

“In 11th grade I started working for a lady down the street making \$10 a week. I would just clean her house. One thing that really disturbed me was that I could not go in the front of her house. Even though I cleaned the entire house—I was not allowed to go out the front door. She had this daughter from Louisiana. I heard her daughter say to her one day, “Mother, I believe this is going to be her last year with us because she is

going to be a senior in high school and will probably go off to college and she is probably not going to work for you anymore.” And, I was saying to myself that ‘Yes, I have to get out of high school and get into college.’ So, I finished high school. All of my friends went to college out of town and I really wanted to go. But, I knew my parents were unable to send me (gets emotional). I really didn’t want to go to the local university. But, I made up my mind that I was going to take a full load and get out of college in three years. And sure enough, I finished in three years. I was determined to get out. I knew if I got out of college I could go other places. Things of that nature and those experiences helped to mold that thought that I had to get out of Bluff County and see the world.”

Many African Americans noted that teachers were influential in their childhood.

Many continue to discuss education as an important tool for success. Several also noted that they felt their educational attainment was an advantage when running for office.

Social Construction of Leadership Development

Shamir, et al. (2005) in similar life history work found four proto-type leadership development stories. These include, “leadership development as a natural process, leadership development as a learning process, leadership development as a story of coping with difficulties and leadership development as finding a cause” (p. 20). The stories found in this sample were not as straight forward as these categories though they are used as an organizer. For most participants, the construction of their leadership story falls under leadership as a learning process. This process is discussed along with the important social institutions that aided in the development including family, community and the church. African Americans in particular also discussed leadership as a cause. This cause was most often articulated in terms of social justice. Experiences such as racism and growing up during the Civil Rights Movement aided in the construction of leadership as the attainment of social justice.

Leadership as Learning Process: The Role of Institutions

Family and Community Structure

Among African Americans, the influence of family and community were important in shaping perceptions of community and leadership. Within the family, the mayors discussed how their parents or grandparents were instrumental in conveying messages such as “always believe in yourself” and “no such thing as can’t.” Participants also noted how those individuals influenced their thinking about leadership. For some participants their parents were not involved politically while they were growing up. This is true among both whites and blacks. However, they learned important values that they practice through their leadership today. Mayors Weaver and Stone, both white males, note the following about the impact of parents.

“I judge people not by their financial status but what I see them do for their fellow man and community. I want them to judge me the same way. (Interviewer asks where those values came from). I would probably have to say my mother. I was raised to know right from wrong. Now, not to saying we didn’t get into trouble as all kids do. They raised us to be respectful of all people. If it hadn’t have been I am positive that I would not be in this position today. I think everyone should be a leader. You know, giving back and doing for the community. My parents both worked in the public [parents did handy man work]. They knew nearly everyone in town. That helped me to know the community. It helped me with the knowledge of the people.”

For others, they had parental figures which were involved in politics and they recall their first understandings about leadership from interaction with them.

Mayor Stone recalls the following:

“Well, my Dad was always involved in our local politics. I remember the first democratic convention that I listened to on the radio in 1952. My Daddy was a staunch Democrat. He voted most of the time. I was always interested in politics after that. We always elected supervisors and sheriff

and he was always active in those races. I liked watching the impact on the community that being involved could have. I may be an unusual case, but even those around me still hold their parents values and beliefs. My Dad taught me good work ethics and believed you ought to get an education and prepare yourself to do better. Honesty, integrity and character. My Dad always said that is all you got is honesty and integrity.”

During Mayor Stone’s conversation about running for office, those were the values he ran his political campaign on. He notes,

“I’ve learned you don’t make promises you can’t keep. That is what we strive toward. We talk about the positive. But, I made people three promises when I ran. I said, I’ll be honest, available and work hard. I can do those three things, but I can’t promise to build you a house, find you a job or pave your streets. I don’t have the money. But, we will work towards those things.”

Mayor Banks, like other white males in the sample, recalls a message about the ability to stand on your own. He expresses it in this way,

“I came from an affluent family. But, I was taught to do things on my own. I had an independent streak. You got to have that to be anything if you are going to be on your own. I have always been on my own. You have to be strong and independent.”

African American women also discussed the important of parents and grandparents in how they now practice leadership. Mayor Turner recalls,

*“My mother and father were not those out in the community leading any rallies. At home they taught real strong values for us. We were to take into consideration others and respect others. We were taught that from day one. We respected each others toys and privacy and in the community we showed respect. So, my values and political ideas really stem from that. My thing is to deal with issues and not personalities to try and bridge the gap and listen to both sides. You might not accept everything we talk about or agreed to do, but we focus on one goal. **Where do you thing that value comes from?** Probably my grandmother. Wow, she probably didn’t even have a high school diploma. She had a philosophy that at least one person always had to keep the level head. Even after I was married she would hold our hands and tell us to keep a level head. What I liked about her is she didn’t say “Ann” you keep the level head or “Allen” you keep the level head, but just that one of us keep it level. I just remember her being a strong person. She wasn’t so vocal. She was just mild and even tempered. Always*

professional and a lady of grace. She was an easy person to talk to. I just admired her patience and she took time to teach and talk to you. Her faith was just unshakable. I really think that is where I get my faith from. Watching her faith and belief and standing firm. I would also listen to my father and uncles talk about the political candidates and what they believed in.”

Mayor Turner continually discussed this idea of keeping a level head and building bridges throughout the interview. In fact, it was her motivation in running for office that she provide leadership to work toward better race relations and allow an opportunity for those who traditionally felt left out of city politics to express their concerns.

Mayor Welch also discussed in great detail the influence of family. She notes,

“My mother and father were role models. Just being here in a rural area and what my father instilled in us that it is better to work for yourself. Just being caring was also instilled in us. First, of all care for yourself, but also care for others. I have always been the type to lean towards older people. You know, even growing up I had all my little younger friends, but I always just enjoyed sitting down with the oldest person and hearing some of that rich history. I will never forget that. I just soaked up all of that from them.”

In terms of African American men, Mayor Hughes shared the following about influences:

“I tell you what, I could not have had a better upbringing. I wasn’t raised by a man, I was raised by a woman. I had my upbringing I think in the most prosperous way that a poor black boy could. My grandmamma and old aunt—she was a wisdom minded old lady. I was raised to love everybody. I was told by my aunt, she said, “Come here son and let me tell you something.” I said, “Yes ma’am.” She said, “I want to tell you two things. One you be respectful and obedient. I want you to know this. A good reputation goes farther than a green back dollar.” I have learned that is true. She also said that no matter how many dollars I made in my life I was not to be wasteful. I took those as some of the most important values that could be taught. I learned a lot about leadership from both of them. My mother (grandmamma) was just like I am. She didn’t know how to say no. She was involved in everything. She was always in the road doing something for someone.”

Mayor Hughes discusses in great detail the various ways he serves his community that he feels are reflective of his inability to say no. He shares that as mayor he is not only responsible for taking care of city business but also caring for people. He notes,

“I’m a people person. I love doing things for people. Right now I am helping a young man who just got back from the war. He had a problem when he got home and got into the streets. He found that wasn’t what he wanted to be. He came to me about two months ago and said he wanted to go to school. He said he wanted to better himself. He asked if the bus came through here to the town where the college is located. I told we would check. It didn’t, but I told him not worry about it. I brought him up there. I brought him up there just this morning. He just called a little while ago.”

Mayor Jones shared the following about the influence of his family on the practice of leadership.

“My grandparents [who raised him] had a very strong work ethic. They believed in being fair and honest with people. The fact they were so people orientated because of the jobs they had it was very easy for me to adapt to that. They were genuine with their relationships with people and family. They believed in carrying yourself with dignity. Because even as I continue to become a man, there is nothing my grandparents have told me that was not out of place. It’s all working for me right now. I have a passion for people and for people to understand the importance of unifying and coming together for a common cause. I have a passion for people to understand that a community divided will not stand and with our issues it works better to work together. My parent’s commitment to public life was not as extensive because they did not have opportunity. They knew what was going on, but to actually sit down at the table and voice an opinion was not there. Daddy did not see me get elected, but he did get to see me be involved.”

But, some participants pointed out, it is not until later in life that they began to understand the values their parents were teaching were important in their community life/work. As Mayor Lay recalls:

“My Dad was a career soldier. I was in some ways ashamed that he did not have a job where he could take his son to work and teach him the trade. It was not until I actually joined the military myself that I saw what my Dad taught me. It was dignity and integrity. All through officer’s training school I thought, ‘Man, this is what my father taught.’”

Mayor Gray notes,

“When you are young you do not think much about it. You just think you have mean parents. But, when you get older you think about it and realize that they were just instilling values that will go a long way. As a child you do not understand that. My parents always taught the value of hard work and doing something right the first time. That had a big affect on how I do things and how I am now.”

Experiences in the community were also important in the construction of leadership for these leaders. Many participants discussed involvement in school activities which built leadership understanding. Others noted they were “raised by the community. Participants noted neighbors who “watched over them” (Mayor Ray) and others who were actively involved in community change efforts that taught them about what it means to be a leader” (Mayor Meredith).

In terms of involvement, Mayors Welch (African American woman) and Jones (African American male) discussed in great length the importance of community activities. Mayor Welch recalled:

“My teachers were actually instrumental. We had DECA Club and that helped build business skills. We did marketing skills and those skills were useful. We had speech and it taught us the proper way to speak.”

Mayor Jones notes:

“I was in 4-H and they instilled a lot of values in me. They introduced you to public speaking and fun contests where we competed with other younger people. Oral presentations taught us to speak in front of crowds. They taught us to be articulate and knowledgeable in front of people. I was also class president. I learned to use outspokenness within perspective. I used that outspokenness to gather information from other students to see what they would like to see. We would gather together and share that with our teachers. But, 4-H was a big plus. It was an opportunity to get growth and also helped us become well rounded young people.”

As mentioned previously, others, particularly African Americans, discussed being raised by the community. Mayor Ray recalls,

“We were raised by the community. Anybody who saw us doing wrong you just knew they were going to tell your mother. We knew we were going to get it. We knew that almost everyone in the community was like a mother to us. There was this one lady, Mrs. John and she was blind. She would always give us advice about how to live and how to grow up.”

Mayor Heron recalls,

“You know you’ve heard the old African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child? Well, in this town that was really true. When I was a kid if I was supposed to be going somewhere and took a left instead of a right someone would see me and tell me to go back. My father was a community man.”

Both African American and white participants discussed the importance of family in shaping their values and beliefs. They make note of how these values are important in how they lead. The community was also important in the upbringing of African Americans. White participants seldom mentioned the community as a whole in raising and influencing them. Their major influences were parents. African Americans also discussed in great detail the important role that community activities had in shaping leadership skills. Organizations such as 4-H and school clubs were particularly important.

The Role of the Institutional Church: Empowerment, Service and Leadership

African Americans discussed the experience of being raised in the church as important to their life history as well as important in their constructions of leadership. In fact, ten of the twelve shared significant experiences in terms of mentors, first leadership experiences and learning about leadership through the structure of the church. For many, the church became the place they learned about leadership. Most shared thoughts about men and women who served as spiritual mentors throughout their childhood and youth.

Several also shared that it was through the church they realized their leadership potential. Many noted they felt they were leaders at a young age through teaching Sunday school, attending youth conferences, and public speaking through the church structure. These activities developed their leadership skills.

The church served as an outlet for community service. Many noted that during their childhood it was one of the only outlets their parents were involved with. During that time they noted that community service was linked to the church because no other opportunities were really present. Finally, the majority of African Americans discussed the continued importance of the institution of the church in their later leadership activities and process of running for public office. Mayors Ray and Turner noted that their prayer groups were instrumental in the decision to run for office as well as in aiding in the campaign itself.

Leadership for many black and white leaders was framed through the influence of religion. Many defined leadership through scriptures. During interviews they cited scripture to make a point about motivation for running or how they practice leadership within the context of what they are taught at church. The use of prayer was also discussed in terms of making decisions that affected the community. Mayor Gray's comment really explains how many African Americans in particular discussed prayer.

“You hear me talk about God because my belief in God and faith in God has brought me a long way. It has helped me so much on this political journey. I have called on Him more than I ever have in my whole life. I've learned things from this calling [elected leadership]. It gives me inner peace.”

However, this was different for African Americans and Whites. The message received by African Americans within the church was framed within a context of

empowerment and working to better the social situation of their fellow residents. As Mayor Ray put it, “the role of leader is one that uplifts the livelihoods of others.” Further, African Americans discussed the role of campaigning in the church. Mayor White’s conversation sums up what many African Americans discussed.

“Every leader needs a church home. I do not think you can be a leader here and not be in the church system. Before I sought the position I talked to my pastor. I had the support of my church. That played a big role. It is almost impossible to be elected and not be rooted in a church system. You do most of your campaigning in the church too. Most people that go to church are going to be those who vote. Those same people are the ones working and wanting to see success. Through the church you can reach out to people. You have to get in that church system.”

However, for Caucasians understanding of leadership was more about how to be leaders within the context of the church and being “good” leaders in the sense of practicing leadership within the teachings of the Bible. It was about modeling oneself after those in the Bible who showed leadership. Many whites discussed the importance of being “born again” Christians. Not one white participant discussed campaigning in the church. However, it was through the church and Bible teachings they learned that one must give back to the community and the role of being a citizen. Therefore, many saw their position as giving back to the community at large. But, the conversations were different than those of African Americans in terms of what “giving back” meant. It did not necessarily have that same empowerment language. For Caucasians they saw running for office as a means of serving, but for African Americans they saw running for office as a way of changing community circumstances.

Leadership as Cause: Working Toward Social Justice

African American participants not only discussed leadership as a learning process from family, community and church, but also in terms of leadership as a cause. The

cause among African Americans was social justice. Though many were not old enough to participate directly in the Civil Rights Movement, they were the first generation really affected by the movement in terms of opportunity. This section discusses the ways in which social justice became the driving force for participating in leadership activities. As Mayor Green notes,

“My generation I think experienced some things that make us appreciate the need to lead because of the things that we were exposed to in terms of segregation and not having decision making capabilities and consequently that helped to shape our thinking in terms of preparing ourselves and in terms of developing leadership skills and wanting leadership opportunities.”

The Role of Racism

Among African Americans the experiences of racism in their childhood and youth functioned in three ways later in their leadership construction. These experiences seemed to translate into either motivation for participating in activities that shaped community, as a measuring tool to gauge progress in their community and the Delta region, or as a way to express how they construct their own knowledge of race relations in relation to leading in the Delta. Mayor Ray shared the following story that exhibits the measuring tool analogy:

“We were very poor, but I always enjoyed looking at the beautiful Christmas decorations in the other community [the white part of town]. Our community is divided. One side is the white and the other side is African American. One day my sister and I went down on the other side across the tracks to look at the beautiful decorations. By the time we got done looking and were on our way back to our side of town the police stopped us. He said, ‘What are you all doing across here?’ My sister said ‘We were looking at Christmas decorations.’ We were so scared. He just said to us that he had better not catch us back across or in that neighborhood again. But, that experience has always stayed close to my heart. It is so amazing that it happened [becoming mayor]. Growing up it was not in the cards for number one a black person and number two a

female to even think about getting elected here. It never crossed my mind. In fact, I never went to city hall. It was never part of my experience.”

Mayor Simpson’s story exhibits the notion that some used these race experiences to construct how they act in terms of race in the Mississippi Delta.

“After finishing community college I had a sports scholarship to a school in the Mid-West. I had never even been to Memphis. During community college I basically came home from school and chopped cotton all summer. I always desired education. But, I started to make excuses as to why I could not go that far away. My Mama told me she didn’t care and put me on the bus. But, it was the best thing I could have done. It was lonely. There were only two black kids on the team. At that time, it was the 1970’s and everything with the Civil Rights Movement was just starting to calm down and here I am up there. But, the reason I say it was the best thing to happen to me is because Coach put me in the room with a white kid. He came from a good, good, good family. His parents immediately kind of catered toward me. His father would ask me to look after his son because he was so young—he was a freshman and I was a junior. Thanksgiving came around and I could not go home. So, I am in the dorm and in come my roommate and his father. He told me to get up and get ready because I was coming to his house for dinner that day. Here, I am—in the Mid-West—going to a white family’s house and sitting at their table in the 1970’s. I had never been at a table with all the silverware and all this food on the table. I kept wondering if I was going to do the wrong thing at the wrong time. My roommate looked at me and said to eat with whatever fork I wanted to. That was just the kind of people they were. That is why I say that was the best part of my life because I really, really got to know people for who they were and not based on what I heard.”

Finally, Mayor Heron’s experience typifies the other frame—experiences of racism as motivation to become involved.

“I needed part time work while getting my education because my parents could not afford to help. I started working in a local department store and that was the most disappointing job I ever had in my life. They hired me as a sales clerk. A lot of black women came in there at the time. When I started working there I was told that you got a dollar for every dress you sold. One Saturday I did really well and believe it or not that was the week that stopped that policy. A few days later I was told they needed to lay me off. I asked if there was any other work they could hire me for because I really needed a job. She finally said she could hire me to be a

porter—you know that is vacuuming the floors. I could not quit because I was from a family of 11 and we had to help. So, I came in and did that because I could not quit and got the feeling she was trying to make me quit. I wasn't treated fairly at all and I knew it was because I was the only spot [African American] in the store. After the way I was treated—and this was in the 1970's that is what prompted me to help. I started working for the community action agency after that.”

Social justice as a motivator was discussed in three ways and only by African Americans. First, it was discussed as a community decision to organize and elect an African American to the position. The mayors discussed almost a tipping point where the community came together to organize this effort. However, the tipping point came as early as 1977 for some and as late as 2004 for others. Next, social justice served as a motivator in terms of gauging inequalities between the whites and blacks in the same community. Finally, social justice was described as a motivator in terms of opening access to groups who traditionally did not feel connected to city government.

Mayors Meredith and Simpson discussed that the community decided it was time for an African American to be elected to the top position. In Mayor Meredith's community the decision happened in 1993. The mayor at the time had garnered a lot of community power as the manager of the largest employer, a municipal judge and mayor. In order to run an effective campaign against the incumbent the black community held an informal primary before the official primary. During this meeting, those who wanted to run presented their case and qualifications. After the conversation, those in attendance took a vote. The individual who won the vote would get the support of the entire black community. They did not want to split the ticket. At the end, Mayor Meredith won and began the official campaign process. Therefore, there was also the desire to level the power field at least through the attainment of the position of mayor.

In Mayor Simpson's town the decision to organize was in 1977 and followed a pattern similar to the organization of Mayor Meredith's town. However, in this case the town also decided that not only were they going to organize for a black candidate, but also the individual had to be educated. Mayor Simpson feels he was the choice because he had a college education in a time when many others in his town did not.

Mayor Cooley discussed motivation through perceived inequalities between the whites and blacks in the community. He recalls,

"We [the black community] saw the community [white city government] wasn't addressing needs. We felt at that time our town was strictly agriculture just as most of the Delta. We had opportunity in the past to bring in other industry, but it was held back because of the agricultural holding in the area. It was about protecting that business. We also had a very strained relationship with the county at the time [county controlled African American board; White controlled city board]. Everything was argumentative. I've been told the city government always had a distrust of the county government."

However, in this case the black community did not organize around one individual, but several ran in the primaries. It did not seem to be perceived as disadvantage in terms of splitting a ticket in this town. Mayor Cooley was elected in 2004.

Finally, Mayors Turner and Green saw lack of access among African Americans as a motivating factor in running for office. Their perception was that the African American community was disenfranchised from city hall and decision making capabilities. Mayor Turner recalled,

"What I saw on the city council was that many people would come before the council because they were concerned they could not get to this office [mayor's office] to voice their concerns. They did not feel like they had access. I felt like it was time for us to move forward in unifying our city. We are separated by the river by race. Even in 2008 we have those barriers."

Mayor Green discussed it in the following manner,

“I looked at the people here and the make up here, the events, historic happenings and looked at the mind set of the people in terms of the lack of courage and lack of vision in terms of the roles that they had to play here because of history, time, and events. I looked at the population ratio and said this should not be. I asked, ‘Why should we have to take a follower role versus a leading role?’ I’d go to meetings and hear the plight of the people here. I just thought that someone needed to step up and show that everything they are dreaming of can be. You’ve got a population here of 70/30 [black vs. white] and the thirty has been used to leading. They have been used to making the decisions and doing what they want. The seventy has been here following all these years and discontent with all the things the thirty is doing.”

The Influence of the Civil Rights Movement in Continuing Activity toward Social Justice

Though many of the participants discussed the importance of the civil rights movement in their childhood and thinking about leadership, only two discussed actual participation at great lengths as children and youth. In particular Mayor Meredith discussed the great influence of two local civil rights leaders and their organizing in her community. She recalls the following about her perceptions of their impact on her views and practice of leadership:

“When I was a child two men in our community were really active. We served as runners for information between the adults. We would go over after school and we would deliver the material to all the black folk their secret meetings. I was about 13 or 14. We would pass out all this information and they would tell us to be careful because we could not let the white folk know we were meeting. They made us feel special and involved. I admired their struggle. It was for all of us because we were people of color. It was something that lay heavy on my heart. It is just not the rights of black people either. It’s just that anybody to me that is the underdog. I always wanted to work in civil rights.”

Many participants discussed the influential nature of leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. Particularly African Americans tended to frame their ideas about leadership and service to community through the works of Martin Luther King, Jr.

They still discuss the notion of the “struggle” in working on issues of poverty. The Civil Rights Movement was also discussed in terms of the importance for the changes between what their parents had access to and what they now have access to. In terms of their construction of leadership, African Americans largely recalled how important this event was for their ability to even be in the position they hold.

The Role of Race, Gender and Social Class in the Construction of Leadership Experiences

The Role of Gender as Disadvantage in Leadership

Women, both white and African American, clearly perceive challenges and opportunities in leadership in the Mississippi Delta which are based on gender. First, three of the women discussed at great length the role gender played in the campaign process. Mayor Bender quickly replied “being a woman” when asked about perceived disadvantages during the campaign process. This disadvantage stems from the belief that as a woman she cannot join the men in the coffee shop at 5 a.m. to discuss community issues. Mayor Heron also discussed the perceived disadvantage of being a woman during the campaign process. She discusses the perception that a woman cannot do the job of mayor as well as a man and the notion that women must prove themselves.

She notes,

“I was running against a man. That man slandered me. He told false accusations. He kept telling everybody that only my kin would get help if I were elected mayor. None of my kin got new houses. Nobody—they all have a house note. He and this group of men said that a woman could not handle the job. It was only in my first election that gender was an issue. I had to prove myself. I don’t know why that is. That bothers me. A man can come out of nowhere and can run for something and they don’t even have to prove themselves. But, women we always have to prove ourselves.”

Mayor Turner discussed similar experiences in terms of the role gender played in the campaign. She, like Mayor Heron seemed surprised by the extent to which it played a role in the campaign. She recalls,

“People look at my husband and see that he is domineering. So, people tried to say he would run my campaign. I am good friends with the president of the city council. They tried to say he was running my campaign like I didn’t have a brain. What got me is that nobody said any of this when I was on the council. I was on the council for 12 years (she slaps the desk). Not 4, not 8, but 12 years. Nobody said anything until I wanted to step in and run for the top position. I will tell you I was shocked by it. How can it be that all of a sudden I cannot lead? What happened to the fact that I was on the council? Why all of a sudden because I want to run for mayor do I have to be lame brained?”

All three women were long time members of the city council. Their perception was that gender was never an issue during the campaigns for that office is important. At least in their construction of the process, gender did not become an issue until the decision was made to run for the top position which was traditionally held by men in their communities. At that point, they perceived gender became a weapon for opponents to use once they were running for mayor.

Being a woman was also cited as a challenge for some once they were elected mayor. Mayor Gray was the first female mayor of the town. When asked about whether gender was an issue she said not during the campaign, but once she took over it became an issue with some of the employees and at the county level. She recalled,

“It took me some years to work that out. I guess me being the new kid on the block I had to prove myself. I guess even in the political arena where we now have more women mayors. Sometimes at county meetings I do not get the feeling I am treated the same. I am the only woman at the table. For example, I went to the county board to request funds for equipment (a back hoe and other things to help clean up the town). I watched as we went through this process and the men before me got what they asked for. During my turn, they basically told me that I didn’t need all that and they would provide half the funds. I called them on it. I told them they gave

everyone else what they asked for without question and they asked for a lot more. I had to lay my religion aside for a moment. But, I did not back down and eventually got the equipment.”

Mayor Ray shared the following about relationships with men in the city following the election:

“Number one, when I first got in office men just did not want a woman to tell them anything. I had to go through that stage until they knew I was not going to back down. We had to go through the stage of letting people know they had to do their job better. They had to do what they were hired to do.”

And, Mayor Bender shared the following experience which also demonstrates the challenge of gender once in the position of mayor. But further, Mayor Bender is the only white woman in the sample. She appeared to take issue with being considered “aggressive.” Throughout the interview she continually notes, “I am not an aggressive person”. She says,

“I’m not afraid of people—don’t ask me if you don’t want to know the answer in my frank opinion. I don’t pull punches and I don’t sugar coat things. And, in a small town you have to fight—this is a good old boys system and don’t think I don’t know it. I ran against three men and won by the skin of my teeth. I won is the optimal word. I am the first female mayor. I looked up to our previous mayor a lot. I liked his aggressiveness believe it or not. But, our leadership styles are polar.”

What was clear in throughout the course of the interview, from the tone and language Mayor Bender is a strong personality and forceful. She was very open and did not shy away from discussing difficult issues such as gender. She knows she is up against a strong network of men. However, she seems hesitant to own this conception of leadership which is very much like that of her predecessor. She recognizes that in just running for mayor in her town it was stepping into male territory. She says,

“I was a woman taking a masculine step when I did that they [her male board] fought me tooth and nail the first year. You know as a woman, this

is extremely crude, but I've always likened it to let's see who has the biggest private part. According to the men here, they are supposed to make the decisions and women are not supposed to take it upon themselves. So, it was hard for me to prove that I could pee farther and I could do it better sitting down."

Therefore, the analysis brings forth another dimension of gender relations based on the culture of the rural South which is further explored in the discussion.

The Role of Gender as Advantage in Leadership

Two women saw gender as an advantage during the campaign process. This perceived advantage operated in two ways. First, was the notion that particularly black women are seen as more suited to leadership positions. Mayor Meredith explains:

"People will support females in the Mississippi Delta because we are the go getters. We will do things that our male counterparts will not do. Even men told me that during the election. They did not want to vote for a man because they did not think they would do the job. The female is going to get the job done."

Mayor Meredith was one of those mayors involved in activities of the civil rights movement in her childhood. Much of the civil rights literature notes the importance of the work of women in the background of the movement (Allen, 1996). Though this was not an advantage discussed by other women it is a notion that is documented in other research (Allen, 1996).

For other women, gender was seen as an advantage through the perception that women see community differently than men and approach the leadership role differently.

Mayor Ray explains,

"I didn't see any advantages in running in terms of experience, but as a woman. I felt that I could, not do better than a man, but I could see the beauty and potential in my town that I don't believe a male could see."

For Mayor Heron, being a woman means the perception that she will approach the role of mayor differently than the male counterparts. She notes,

“This other group of men started saying a woman could not do the job. But, I believe that a woman is in the best position because we nurture and care. We are the family person and that is the way we are going to treat our constituency.”

Finally, two women discussed remodeling once they entered the physical office of mayor. They each noted that the office was very masculine in terms of decoration and that it was very important for them to create an open and warm environment for constituents visiting the office. At great length they discussed the remodeling process and showing the various ways they arranged the furniture in order to be perceived as an individual who would listen to issues and problems of the community. Other women briefly mentioned steps made to improve approachability and this was something that was largely missing from male accounts of experience once they reached office.

Intersection of Gender and Social Class in Leadership Experiences

In this sample, there was one experience that demonstrated the intersection between gender and social class to a great degree. Mayor Bender was the only white woman involved in the sample. During her election experience she shared the following about the networks involving social class in the Mississippi Delta and her location as a woman. She believes that many of the votes garnered by her opponents were through the “good old boy system.” Mayor Bender recalls,

“As a woman you have to take a step back and say, damn there is a good old boys system. I would have never believed it here in Creek County. I would have always seen myself being assessed as a person. I thought I had probably won by 120 votes. I had people who looked at me in the face and said you can count on me. These were people I had grown up with, who I had been friends with, people who I had taught their children.

Then, to win by such a very narrow margin and going through that list the reality just slaps you in the face.”

What is interesting about this reflection about the old boys’ network in Creek County is that likely it has always existed. But, this was her first experience coming up against it. There is no way to tell who voted for her and where the votes came from, but it was only through this experience she recognized the structure of the town in terms of this underlying network. As her husband is a well-known business owner and she openly comments that these individuals were her friends she was a part of this influential circle. She believed she was an equal part of this circle until trying to break into the top elected position which was male dominated and dominated by individuals in this network. The town has yet to elect an African American in this top position and only in 2004 did they elect someone other than a white male.

The Role of Race in Leadership Experiences

The majority of participants whether black, white, male or female discussed race during the interview process. Some saw race as a disadvantage or challenge in both the campaign as well as after winning the position. However, for some race served as an advantage. Participants discussed the challenge that race places on the social relationships necessary for community improvement. Finally, participants shared examples of the intersections of race and social class.

The Role of Race as Disadvantage in Leadership Experiences

Race was discussed as a disadvantage both during the campaign process and once taking over the position of mayor. Both whites and blacks discussed the challenges of leading in a community where social relationships are stressed by racial divisions.

In terms of the campaign process, in some communities the disadvantage of race was cited due to the fact they were the “firsts” running for the position in their town. Mayor Turner ran against an incumbent white male who held the position for fourteen years. The city had elected neither a woman nor an African American to that top position. Prior to running for mayor she served on the city council. She recalls spending a lot of time campaigning in the north of the city which is predominantly white because she wanted to be seen as working for both sides of the city. But, she also believed her time spent on the city council helped her win African American votes. Further, she discussed at great detail how her race was perceived as a weakness during and after the campaign. She notes,

“I was available for 12 years for people to see me. You had an opportunity to watch how I handled myself on the council and try to move issues forward and not be confrontational. But, unfortunately the vote was split down racial lines. White went one way and African Americans went another and we just happened to have the most votes. We had other African Americans run before. But, I think the fact that I have experience that made me the best candidate to run against the mayor. But, people still talked negatively. They were saying that our town was not ready yet (for a black mayor) and that the city would go broke if we had a black mayor.”

Mayors Cooley and Jones shared a similar perception that many in the community felt the race of the candidate was a weakness. They recall,

“In our case, the former mayor knew he was not going to win. He knew a black was going to get elected. But, there is always a feeling that certain people, in this case blacks, are not qualified for the job because they have never had the job.” (Mayor Cooley)

“Well, (pause) some of my opponents were white and some were black. But, I was the first African American who won the position. Leading in the Mississippi Delta it requires making changes and the kind of changes deeply rooted in people. Unfortunately, those changes are impacted by race. And, sometimes it is not so pleasant. But, in representing the community you represent everybody. In those situations you have to find a way to deal with them (whites). And, you have to find a way to prove that

just because I am African American does not mean that I cannot get the job done. Sometimes, I felt like I was the wrong messenger when I gave presentations.” (Mayor Jones)

White men also discussed the challenge of race. However, for them it was that they were elected in predominately black communities where the community had already crossed the barrier of electing the “first.” They have the sense that something has changed in the culture of how people now perceive candidates running for office. Mayor Stone shared the following about his perceptions of the campaign experience:

“I had worked for the mayor for four years when I ran against him. He and I got at odds. He had been in office for twelve years. People will never forget the mistakes you make and he thought the office belonged to him. He was young and black. I don’t have a problem with that. But, he thought the people owed him the office and tried to use that and play the race card. I think that hurt him more than anything. You have to take into consideration that I am white running in a 70% black community. I think it was an achievement to beat him. I think it speaks highly of the people of the community too. That is one thing we have seen change in the Mississippi Delta. The people are more willing to start looking at the person’s character and integrity and what he stands for than just the color of his skin. I am proud to be a part of that.”

As a white man Mayor Weaver also noted the importance of his election in a town with an eighty-percent African American population. He said that it “meant a lot to him” that he was elected by a 65% margin in the election against African American individuals who had long been in the political arena including an ex-mayor (the first African American elected by the town), a city council member as well as a vice mayor.

However, winning the position did not alleviate the impact of race on social relationships. Mayors discussed how race impacted their ability to work within the community. First, Mayor Turner discussed the challenges of proving her ability as well as educating those in the community about what the position of mayor could and could not accomplish.

“Some thought that all would be hunky dory on the one side and on the other hand people that thought Greenwood was going to go down the drain. I had people that thought when I got into office I was going to be able to repair their leaky roofs. Well, I had to explain that I could not give them money for personal repairs. I was trying to show them that the city doesn’t have funds for certain things and that I can manage city funds at the same time.”

Mayor Meredith discussed that she knew going into the position she would not have the full support of the community for her agenda based on her race. She said,

“I knew I wouldn’t get the full support of the community. See white folks live in separate communities, but you are governed by the same people. That’s even in the church. You go to your church and I go to my church even though we’re praying to the same God. That’s the disadvantage that some people will not support you because of your color. And, that is the disadvantage of being mayor in a small town. You have certain people that think they exist under different leadership even though we all have the same mayor. I had hoped at one time communities would not be divided. But, I do not think that is going to happen because some people just cannot change their mindset and I do not try anymore.”

Mayor Lay discussed the challenge of being a white male and making decisions based on experience and qualifications rather than on race and trying to have equal involvement in community decisions. He recalls the following two situations,

“I’m not saying I am a liberal, but I was far more liberal than what these white people had ever seen. I had the policy, and I had to convince the board to do it, to hire the most qualified people. We had an instance where two equally qualified people were up for assistant chief of the fire department. The chief wanted the white candidate and I wanted the black candidate. Well, the chief did not like that. But, I went to the board and told them it was time to start doing these things. That did not sit well with the council or the community.”

“I met with 28 white people at the chamber before we got started on the charter school. They spent 50 minutes telling me why we needed a charter school in Wave County. After they finished their part, they wanted me to respond. I told them they were asking for some dramatic changes in the way Wave County does business. But, unless the next time we met the group was not at least half African American I was not meeting with them again. I told them that this was a community. We are beyond the point where one side runs the community. African Americans are very

suspicious of white motives and whites feel they have given African Americans too much already. In town, if there is a program sponsored by blacks hardly any whites attend and vice versa. It is just too bad.”

However, some mayors discussed the racial challenges in terms of a disadvantage that has now turned into events that are positive for the community. In all cases the changes surrounded community events such as festivals and parades. For these mayors, the challenge of race has been creating events that include both the white and black community. Mayor Ray, an African American, was one leader that attempted multiracial community activities such as singing carols in the park. Of the experiences she said,

“Before organizing the caroling in the park, I could never go into First Baptist Church. My feet had never been on any part of that campus. They were about to have morning service one Sunday and I thought I would go in and ask the director to announce about the caroling in the park. I went in and I remember the people just looking at me. They looked kind of shocked. But, I walked in and asked to have the event announced. It turned out okay. The choir came and I think we all enjoyed ourselves. Each time I announce something I always send notices to all the churches now.”

Mayor Stone, a white male, discussed a similar experience when organizing the town’s Christmas parade.

“In our Christmas parade about 90% of the people who used to participate were black. Now, it is almost 50/50. We have a diverse team now putting it together. That was our goal and we’ve seen it happen. We are working together in the church more. Of course, we Baptists have a long way to go. We’ve worked on reconciliation and we have worked hard at it. We’ve had some opposition from board members in that area but that is life.”

Finally, Mayor Cooley, a black male, shared that his town, which at one time had two competing music festivals, have now merged the events.

“I think the face of our festival has changed and I think I have been a part of that in a small way. Prior to my becoming mayor, the festival had a flavor of being for one side in terms of appealing one segment of society [white]. So, the [black community] organized a counter festival because

they felt alienated and not included in the other festival. So, you had a competing protest. They did all they could to show the other festival was not inclusive and discriminating. A lot of people had bad thoughts about the original festival. But, now we only have one festival. I think people recognize that music is a universal joining of all. It's [the changes] been well received and we are proud of that."

The Role of Race as Advantage in Leadership Experiences

Most often, race was not discussed as operating as an advantage. For the whites running in predominately African American communities it was cited as a disadvantage. For African Americans running to obtain the position for the first time, it was also cited as a disadvantage. However, for some the historical timing and race was a factor. For Mayor Lay, a white male, he recognized that being white was an advantage during the particular time he was running. His experience also emphasizes this notion of a tipping point that it seems many of these Delta communities have experienced in the last ten years. He notes,

"I was lucky that a couple of things happened during the election. For one, the guy running against me had a bigger ego than I did. He screwed up. He decided to run as an independent and he should not have. He felt that I was the easiest person to beat. I was an outsider. He told the black community to vote for me in the primaries. So, I beat two very well established people in the primary. Well, now my opponent had to go back and tell the people to vote for him in the general election. Two things happened, first enough blacks trusted me and the white community was not ready to vote for a black person for mayor. The white community turned out in droves. I mean they turned out and I got just enough of the black vote. However, in the next election when I ran again the black vote turned out in droves and the white community just didn't care anymore. And, my opponent (same opponent in both elections) was well liked. I think the white community felt that if a black had to be elected it might as well be him."

Other African Americans felt they had an advantage in terms of race as well. For them, it was that the community was either completely African American or at least dominated by African Americans. They note that because of the absence of racial

conflict they had an advantage in the campaign process in that they did not have to worry about their race or ethnicity being a part of the campaign.

Intersection of Race and Social Class in Leadership Experiences

Like with gender, social class intersects with race for some of the stories provided by the mayors. In the case of Mayor Banks he is an upper class, white male. In the interview, issues of race were explicitly discussed and social class was evident in further analysis. Mayor Banks comes from a wealthy, prominent family in his town. The town's demographic make up is largely white. Mayor Banks was elected in the early 1970's and he notes that the town has a tradition of grooming leaders through the local hunting club. He says that once the town puts a mayor in the position they tend to continue electing the same individual. He has been mayor for thirty-seven years. Through the conversation it became evident that he is very well connected with old agricultural money in the Delta as well as with former leading national political figures during the 1970's and 1980's.

He perceived the initial challenge of being mayor was trying to unite the town. His thoughts were that a town divided could not reach its full potential. Therefore, he discusses the steps taken to promote unity. In the late 1980's an alderman was unable to continue his duties as a board member. Until that point the board was all white. Mayor Banks recalls the situation:

“When I approached the board member (he was white) I told him we should appoint someone to fill his slot. He asked me who I was going to appoint. I told him I was going to appoint someone black. He told me I could not do that. I told him I could. I went to the black community and told them what I wanted to do. I asked them to suggest five people and I would pick one of those—I wanted their participation. So, they suggested some folks and I didn't like any of them. I went back to them and told them this was not a popularity contest, but rather who could do the best

job. So, they told me to pick one. I supported this individual when it came time for him to actually run and he won. Also, we had a white lady and a black lady running against each other [later on]. I supported the black lady. It showed the black community they had a stake and that the whites would vote for them. Back in that time that kind of thing wasn't happening in the Delta. Now, they've [black residents] have had a generation come up since and they have seen. Their parents will tell them 'We are a good town. They put us in power and kept us in power. And, we can talk to them.' I think this has been good for our town. We did it before we had to. I think a lot of them other towns had it crammed down their throats. We were proactive about it."

Though no black residents of Mayor Banks town was interviewed for this project, the process of "putting blacks in power" denotes a paternalistic process. The mayor openly notes that he did not like the initial suggestions from the black community for the position. He also notes that the black community simply told him to choose. He discusses this notion of other towns having "it" crammed down their throats. "It" was referring to blacks gaining political power as if it were a negative process. Further in the interview he states that towns that have had "it" crammed down their throat had a lot more turmoil and turnover in their leadership structure. He considers this a negative for communities. His ability to orchestrate such a process and have it accepted can be attributed to the structure of race and social class within that town.

For other white mayors, they share interesting similarities in terms of social class and their ability to be elected in predominately white towns. The three white mayors who were elected in predominately African American towns all grew up in a lower class status. Their parents were farm laborers or domestics. They did not have the affluent background that whites who used to be mayors of these towns possessed. Mayor Weaver describes it like this,

"I've been at the bottom. By coming up and not having anything and people who have come up with stuff and I have to wonder what they have

done with it? I grew up in some people's eyes as poor white trash because I did not grow up in the wealthy part of town. I was not born rich with a silver spoon. Some days we only had milk and bread to eat because times were hard. Some people might look at me and assume I had more because of the position I now hold. No, I didn't."

The other white mayors described similar upbringings. Mayor Weaver noted his social class background as an advantage in relating to people in his community several places throughout the interview. Next, African Americans discussed at several points the powerful, white landowners in the Mississippi Delta and their impact on the ability of mayors to move agendas forward. Mayor Jones notes,

"You will always have some in the community that are for what you are doing and some that are against what you are doing. We have faced leaders, former representatives, and local people who have friends in high places or that may not be in high places anymore. Because you know, in places like this the numbers began to be off balance racially—it is seventy-two percent African American here now. The numbers used to be different. So, you have a lot of old money here. This is a farming community. So, you have a lot of young people who have inherited farms from daddy or granddaddy and you have former elected officials who are no longer serving. It really boils down to a control factor in that, 'no I do not agree with that and so I am not going to support it.' And, if it is that way then the whole purpose of the idea will diminish because of those chosen few."

Mayor Green also recalls the impact of these white elite on his campaign process. He argues that "good old boy political machines" were still active when he made the run for mayor. He explained that he was publicly arrested for a misdemeanor. To further divulge on the charge may identify the individual. He obtained a lawyer and the police department was reprimanded. He also notes that county tax assessor (first black in that position as well) called and warned him that his opponent was making inquiries into his tax situation. He attributes these actions as an attempt to discredit him as a viable candidate for political office in Stream County. Though some mayors discussed the

changes in terms of race relationships in the Mississippi Delta, these experiences show that the structure of the white upper class still holds power in many of these areas regardless of the changes in the political structure that may have happened by electing more blacks to office.

Finally, some black mayors discussed the challenge of working within the black community due to perceived differences in attitude and values. Mayor Hughes discusses it in this way,

“I do not have a problem with race; I deal with the white guy or the black guy. Let me tell you about my wife. She has a white granddaddy and an Indian grandmother. But, still she sometimes falls into the ways of thinking like her friends. One of my main missions of this town is to keep these young people out of prisons and off the streets at night. You got some black people that just cannot understand that. I told these guys that we hired [police] (these white guys) that I do not want these young people on the street at night. So, they started getting them off the street. I had citizens saying these police were harassing the black people in town. My wife started telling me that we needed black police officers. I told her that was not the issue. We had qualified people. She told me, ‘Well, you are just putting our people back into slavery.’ I said, ‘No, our own people are putting themselves in slavery because they are not keeping their butts at home and are not watching their children.’”

Mayor Simpson also discussed the perceived challenge, but also discussed it in terms of the “mind-set” or culture of the people.

“The hardest task as a leader in the Delta is your own people. When I said your own people I mean black folks. See, the more you do to help people the more they expect. It does not matter how much you do they expect or thought you should have done more. See, the resources that were available in 1977 are not there now. The resources that were available in 2001 are not there anymore. This is the biggest challenge is getting people to understand. It is also getting people to understand that education needs to be a priority. You know, look at crime for an example. It has gone up around here. But, nobody wants to say they saw little Johnny go in the house and take the TV. Little Johnny is not in school and his parents are content with it. But, before they admit the fact that they may share some fault they want to blame it on leadership. They will say it is because we do not have this or that in the community. For example, we

are working on our recreation center now. But, that where that will help it is not going to solve the problem.

Mayor Simpson continues in this vein when asked about solutions to this issue.

“I think the help is going to come from changing the mind set of the people. That is the biggest challenge getting people to understand that education is still important. It is important that you have a high school education, but that is not enough these days. It is important that you get two years of college, but that is still not enough these days. You have to continue to reach higher. There needs to be a change in the mentality. One individual cannot make a difference if the mindset is against it. It is difficult when parents who go down to the elementary school are not there to talk about the education of their child, but they go down wanting to know why their child was disciplined. You have to come back and be frank with these parents. You have to preach this in the church. You need to maintain certain values and work toward a goal in life. I really think my biggest impact was not being mayor, but when I was a teacher in the district.”

Perceptions on Balancing Leadership Positions and Private Life: Gender Differences

There are explicit gender differences in how male and female participants reacted to and responded to questions about balancing the roles of leader, father, mother, spouse, and so on. The women spent a lot of the interview time on this question and talking about the ways they balance the roles as well as guilt when the balance is not as successful. Further, the women discussed the necessary support system needed in order to be successful. One might think that for the married female mayors the husband would be the main support system. However, this proved untrue. Mayor Heron struggled with the lack of support from her husband once she made the decision to run. She recalls,

“He didn’t want me to become mayor. He really didn’t. After becoming mayor I just sat down with him and told him this was something I really wanted to do. I had to go to a lot of community meetings—more than when I was on the board. He told me not to go to the meetings. He really thought I was just...I don’t know...needed to be at home more. I convinced him to travel with me. From that day forward he never said anything else. But, at first he was just like those other men out there.”

She also explained that in the beginning her daughter was still in grade school. She said that her mother and sister were there to care for her child when she had to travel for the role of mayor. She noted that this support made her feel comfortable that her daughter was in good hands. Mayor Gray shared that balancing the roles was a challenge initially. She says,

*“At first I could not. I would take my work home with me because I had so much organizing to do. But, now I am more organized and have more help at the office. **Interviewer asks about her support system...** I would say my husband, but I would be lying. My daughter has been my support at home. We kind of handle stuff. It would be much harder if my children were not grown. I don’t know if I could do it with little children. It took so much out of me at the beginning that I know I would have been neglecting my kids”*

The sentiment that Mayor Gray shares about not running for mayor while her children were young was also shared by Mayors Turner, Ray and Collins. But, it was Mayor Turner that discussed this at great length. She noted that prior to becoming mayor she was able to attend all her children’s functions. She discussed that her husband had a demanding job and thus, it was up to her to take care of the kids. She also shared she would not have run for mayor if her children were younger (only one remains at home). She says,

“No, I will be honest with you. I could not give up being involved in my children’s life when they were younger. I did not want to feel guilty.”

Mayor Ray also discussed this problem at great length. She notes that her husband is a minister for three small local churches. As the pastor’s wife there are duties associated with this role. The church depends on her for organizing the paper work, working on bulletins, organizing conferences and activities such as vacation bible school

as well as the outreach associated with a pastor/wife role. She notes that she is thankful that she has no children at home. She states,

“Still, I have to do the church work, housework, take care of my husband. It is a blessing we do not have more children. Well, by the time I get all of that together it is overwhelming. I am on call during the day for the city. Our next door neighbor will call on me to help her—they are older. I have to take care of my husband. As a result, many nights I am up until 2 or 3 in the morning working in all these areas. It is overwhelming sometimes. It really is.”

There were two men who also shared the sentiment that running for public office was not a consideration when their children were at home. For them, it was a matter of finances. The position of mayor does not pay well and it demands time away from their jobs. Further, one mayor gave up one of his businesses, a night club, due to public demand once he became mayor. That was the largest source of his income.

Some men expanded on this subject in the vein that they understand the challenge their role as mayor has placed on their wife and kids. Mayor Green shared the following about the balance of roles:

“This is to the point of putting other individuals’ needs above my own. To me, that is public service. My wife, she cannot stand that. But, she knows that I am committed. I think she is coming to accept that because she is coming home later this summer. She has worked out of state in order to help put the kids through college. It has been a challenge to our marriage to be a part like this. You practically do not have a life as a private citizen. It demands a lot and takes away a lot from my family. People are asking me to run again. But, two terms is enough. I think more people should have a turn to lead. I’ve done my time. My family sacrificed. I think there are some things I want to go back and do and work on my family. They deserve that.”

Mayor Simpson has been mayor since age 24 and gives a life long perspective on this challenge. He notes,

“That is difficult. I remember when my son was 12 or 13 wanted to spend time with me. It was difficult because not only was I mayor, but I was a

teacher and coach. His mother would not let him go on overnight trips with the team. He said to me one day, 'Daddy, you do not spend a lot of time with me.' It made me sit down and think about it. I started to spend more time with him. I started to take him places even though I was tired. And, so now that they are grown and have their own children, I sort of take more time with my grandchildren because I can see some things that I did not have the opportunity to do with my own children. My wife was the one who had to take them back and forth to school when I was working. It was difficult to balance that. But, we did go to church on Sunday as a family. I thank God we were able to get through it."

Mayor Lay recognizes that he has not worked out the balance of public and private life.

He says,

"I haven't, I really haven't. Luckily I am married to a woman who works. When I ran for mayor I was divorced. I literally did enough work to pay my child support and send the kids a little something extra. I didn't care about anything else. I was focused on being mayor. I am remarried now. My wife knows that I love what I do. I promised her at one time that I would give up politics, but then I was asked to run for state legislature. She told me that she knew I could not keep that promise."

Finally, Mayor Cooley notes there is no "after hours" when one is mayor of a small town. The mayor is always accessible. However, the challenge to his family was during the campaign. He recalls,

"During that time there were vicious rumors that had spread across the community. They tried to say that I had been arrested a number of times and had a hidden family. It was hard on my wife because of all the rumors. People would call and want to talk about the rumors with her. And, the first two years were rough on her because of the calls we would get at home about service. It was a strain at first."

The remaining seven males did not expand much on the subject. Interestingly, several of them had to be prompted to discuss their wives in the role of balancing public and private life. Many noted that their wives liked the travel associated with the position or "thought" their kids and wives had adjusted to his role as a public official. Others said they separated the two roles by trying not to bring the work home, but noted that if their

wives wanted to discuss it they had to exclude them. Finally, one noted that his children are now an asset to his position since they have graduated from college and now have jobs in marketing, law, and so on.

For the women of the sample, becoming mayor does not exclude the other roles of mother and spouse. They had to find support systems to maintain the roles. Most often this was through other women in the family. For the men, often they understood that their role affected their wives and children. However, for others it did not appear to be an issue considering the short conversations, no matter how much I probed. It very well may be that there is no conflict. However, an interesting follow up study would be to interview the wives of mayors.

Summary

Participants of this study mostly discussed leadership in terms of being a learning process. This learning process included the importance of family, the community and the church. Within the church, African Americans and Whites heard different messages in regard to empowerment, service and leadership. These understandings affected how they practiced leadership. Leadership was also characterized as a cause. The cause is social justice. Racism was a part of the motivation for leading among African Americans. Oftentimes, participants noted that experiencing racism motivated them to run for office or participate in community affairs. Others used experiences of racism as a measuring tool in terms of how their community has changed. Finally, experiences of racism and positive experiences of race relations were influential in how they currently construct race relations in the role of their elected position. Finally, the Civil Rights Movement and leaders associated with the movement were important to many African Americans in

getting involved in leadership. What is clear, this learning and constructing leadership is an ongoing process.

The analysis also focused on the ways race, class and gender are present in the construction of leadership. Gender clearly was perceived as a constraint for many of the women interviewed. It was also during this section, we saw the intersection of gender and social class. Race was also considered a constraint to many of those interviewed—both black and white. It served as a constraint in terms of running for office, ability to work within the community after election, bridging racial divides, and also changing “mind sets” of community residents. Examples were also provided in terms of the intersection of race and social class. These stories clearly illustrate the comment taken from Collins (1993) in the beginning of this chapter that all these factors combine to play a role. Finally, from the research individuals spoke about the challenges of balancing public and private life. Women clearly saw gender roles in terms of caring for family and the role of wife as constraining as their husbands were not always present. Some of the men discussed the challenges of balancing the two and impact it had on their families. But, seven of the men no matter how they were questioned did not perceive an issue.

Chapter 5: Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter provides a broad overview of several bodies of literature. However, a brief discussion of defining leadership is provided first. Next, the chapter discusses four bodies of leadership literature which includes work within the managerial framework, transformational leadership, and contributions from education as well as political science. The chapter then focuses on the overarching idea in this research study: structure, agency and culture. Then the piece moves on to discuss the barriers and opportunities this research focuses on. They include race, gender and social class. During the research process, it was found that empowerment theory could contribute to our understanding of the participants' experiences and thus a perspective on empowerment is included. Along with empowerment, the political science theory of black political empowerment is explored. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look at the unique contribution that a sociological lens can provide to the literature on leadership.

Important Developments in Leadership Theory and a Discussion of Community Leadership

Within the leadership literature there are numerous competing theories and models of the process. This section will discuss the issues in defining leadership. It will also discuss the bureaucratic-managerial model of leadership which dominates the field. This model will be contrasted with transformational leadership theories, theories of leadership which best suit the notion of leadership within community as well as theories which political science has introduced.

In regard to leadership definitions, Antonakis et al. (2004) cite Fielder's argument that, "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are leadership theories—

and there are almost as many theories of leadership as there are psychologists working in the field” (Antonakis et al., 2004 p. 5). Leadership definitions tend to be vague. They also tend to combine leadership and other social influencing processes (Bass, 1990). Leadership has been widely defined and conceptualized using some of the following ideas: leaders as the focus of group processes, personality traits of individual leaders, exercise of influence, form of persuasion, power relations, and means of achieving goals. The ideas are used separately and other times combined to describe and define leadership (Bass, 1990).

In the organizational leadership literature there are certain assumptions which underlie the bureaucratic-managerial model. First, the model assumes that leadership is a vested in a position. Foster (1989) argues that this assumption is inherent in almost every leadership model developed in the last thirty years. This model also supposes that “leadership is goal centered and driven by organizational needs. The reason for exerting leadership is not social change, or meeting followers’ needs, but achieving certain organizational goals” (Foster, 1989 p. 43). Therefore, the leader’s job is to motivate people to produce. In this model leadership is essentially about exercising power over people to get things done. And, as Foster (1989) argues, this very act legitimizes leadership in this context.

The bureaucratic-managerial model also focuses on the accomplishment of tasks in the most effective and efficient manner. These assumptions are rooted in the desire to make the workplace error-free (Foster, 1989). Because this model has been written about many times, we have seen its assumptions carry over into other contexts including the community. After all, many of the responsibilities of mayors in small towns revolve

around managing the routine tasks of keeping a city operating and making sure services are delivered efficiently and effectively.

Another important area of leadership literature is the work of theorists on transformational leadership. These theories have also carried over into the literature on community leadership as often times leadership education programs approach leadership development from a transformational leadership style. These theories are rooted in the work of James McGregor Burns (1978). He argues that a transformational leader “looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower. The result is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders” (Antonakis et al., 2004 p. 173). Bass (1985) also argues that transformational leadership behavior can help leaders transform followers into a cohesive group able to perform at higher levels. Bennis and Nanus (1997) explored transformational leadership and identified four leadership strategies commonly found among transformational leaders. These leaders focus on communicating a vision, creating meaning through communication, creating trust through consistent action, and the development of self through building on personal strengths and adapting them to fit the needs of organizations. Finally, Kouzes and Posner (2002) identified five leadership behaviors they argue describes transformational leadership. They argue that leaders must take advantage of the opportunities and take risks in the leadership process. Further, transformational leaders must be able to construct, convey and mobilize visions to followers as well as collaborate. Rost (1985) argues that leadership is not management and the view expressed in the previous section has no place in a discussion about

leadership. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see why leadership education programs are drawn to the work of transformational leadership.

However, what is meant by community leadership? What are the elements necessary to create community leadership? What are the goals of community leadership? Foster (1989), an educational leadership theorist, and Rost (1993) propose certain tenants for educational leadership that are very useful in articulating a theory of community leadership. Further, some of these elements share the tenants of the transformational leadership literature.

First, Rost (1993) argues leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend to make real change. Present in this argument are those assumptions that should be present in a theory of community leadership (Pigg, 1999). Leadership is relationship based. It is a process of negotiation between leaders and followers. Furthermore, it assumes that leadership is fluid. Those who are leaders may become followers and those who are followers have the opportunity to become leaders. However, as Pigg (1999) points out power resources at any given time in this relationship can distinguish leaders from followers. He argues that this differential in power resources is what “permits the exercise of more influence by leaders than that which can be exercised by followers” (p. 201).

Within communities, elected leaders are not the only leaders. There are those individuals who are involved improving other community concerns. There are those who are involved in training youth not only in education, but encouraging civic engagement. The field of community leadership is much broader than political positions. These

leaders should not be discounted, but other types of leaders must be considered in any theory of community leadership.

Foster (1989) elaborates on this concept by arguing that leadership is critical. First, he states that viewing human practice as constructed allows one to view leaders as people who can make changes. Thus, leaders can critically examine situations and make changes accordingly. As Foster states,

Leadership at its heart is a critical practice, one that comments on present and former constructions of reality, that holds up certain ideals for comparison, and that attempts at the enablement of a vision based on an interpretation of the past (p. 52).

Therefore, leadership is not just focused on achieving community goals, but to also structure and restructure the reality of a community.

Further, Rost (1985 & 1993) provides a definition of leadership that focuses on producing social vision and change. Leaders involved in community leadership not only focus on goal attainment, but on real structural change within the locale. As Foster (1989) states, “leadership is and must be oriented toward social change, change which is transformative in degree” (p. 52). But he argues for a difference between social change and societal change which is useful for community leadership. He argues that social change can occur without necessarily restructuring a society through the action and activities of small groups who hope to make a difference. The effect may be more regionalized than necessarily large scale societal change. This fits well when thinking about community leadership. Communities operate within larger structures than just “the local.” They must contend with larger societal structures such as state and national policy as well as the changes globalization is imposing on communities. Responses to

such problems will be felt on the local level, but still can be considered social change though not influencing necessarily overall national or international structure.

Foster extends his theory of leadership beyond the definition provided by Rost. He adds that leadership is educative and ethical.

Human agents are located in a specific history and set of circumstances, one which to some degree controls their behavior, ways of seeing and options for acting. This history is their tradition, a tradition which suggests how one is to live, what one is to value and often how one is to think. We are both victims and beneficiaries of this tradition: on the one hand, it closes down many options for living free and independent lives; on the other hand, it provides meaning and a sense of place for those lives we do live. But, while tradition can provide meaning, it can also be oppressive (Foster, 1989 p. 53).

Therefore, leadership must also function as a means of education to present a vision and analysis of the current situation. Leaders must provide a means of community self-reflection through discussing the history of a location. An open discussion of this sort can provide an opportunity to consider those areas where action can occur. This may also provide a means of reflecting on ways structure impedes action. Building on this, leaders must provide vision for change based on perceived opportunities. As Foster argues,

This educative aspect of leadership is intended to have citizens and participants begin to question aspects of their previous narratives, to grow and develop because of this questioning, and to begin to consider alternative ways of ordering their lives (p. 54).

The overall work of community leadership is to provide a “good life” for community residents. Foster (1989) situates this within the Aristotelian tradition. He argues that leaders must attempt to construct and relay an understanding of the options available to communities for producing the “good life” for its residents. This is to be a collective endeavor rather than an individualistic one. Community leaders must be more

than elected officials that are put in office to achieve goals. Community is where people organize their lives. More must be taken into account than just the attainment of goals. The most effective and efficient method may not always take into account the social costs of a decision. Meanings about situations are imbued differently depending on social location in the community. Therefore, in reaching goals the contested meanings in a community should be recognized and included in the process of achieving goals.

Finally, the work of political scientists regarding leadership must be considered. This research considers leaders who are elected officials in their community and thus a discussion of the definitions of politics and a political view of leadership is necessary. Tucker (1995) argues that within political science there are generally two views of politics. The first stemming from classical debates about politics, is that leadership is the pursuit and exercise of power. Tucker (1995) points to the work of C. Wright Mills, Anthony Downs, Harold Lasswell and Robert Dahl as influential in this school of thought. The work of Downs (1957) began a view of politics that viewed it from an economic standpoint. Tucker (1995) notes,

“The postulated wealth-maximizing “economic man” of modern political economy finds his counterpart in a postulated power-maximizing “political man” single-mindedly seeking to win elections and stay in office through coalition building in party politics” (p. 5).

Lasswell (1958; 1976) argues politics is “the study of influence and the influential, or who gets what, when, and how” (in Tucker 1995; p. 6).

Some of the first community leadership studies used a framework by Floyd Hunter (1963) to study community power structure. This framework was used to understand the sources of local policy: who was best served by the policy and the process by which policy is created and put in place. It is noted that these studies started a debate

in terms of community leadership and the study of power. Critics argued that the framework only studied one dimension of power—to understand the policy component—and ignored the role of elites and issues of exclusion in exercising community power. Hunter (1963) developed a reputational approach to study community leadership and power. Hunter argued that community decisions were made by a small, powerful group of elite leaders. In response, Dahl (1961) argued that power in communities is distributed across a larger number of groups and individuals in a community than the Hunter studies found. He argued that a decisional approach to community power and leadership was needed rather than a reputational (Israel & Beaulieu, 1989).

However, Tucker (1995) argues that the power approach to politics is not complete. He notes that these approaches are important because

“The pursuit of power goes on constantly under all political systems of which we know. To acquire the role of a constituted political leader, in other words, to occupy an official leadership position in a political order, a person normally seeks power by whatever are the prescribed or permitted means and procedures, and once having become a constituted leader he often seeks to enhance his power position” (p. 7).

There are examples in localities and national politics of the “homo politicus” that Lasswell (1958; 1967) and others described. Some leaders are in elected office for power and to maximize that power in order to stay in office. However, some leaders put their personal and party desires aside to work in the best interest of the community. Politics should not be reduced to simply the seeking and acquiring of power (Tucker, 1995). Further, the power approach to politics does not describe what it is that leaders do once they have secured the elected position and power which is inherent with it. Tucker thus introduces a leadership approach to politics to counter the domination of the power approach.

The leadership approach to politics, according to Tucker, has its starting place in the work of Max Weber. In *Politics as a Vocation* Weber argues,

“What do we understand by politics? The concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of independent leadership action...[However], tonight our reflections are, of course, not based upon such a broad concept. We wish to understand by politics only the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a political association, hence today of a state” (p. 77-78).

However, Weber continued his view of politics in what became similar to the tradition of the power school by noting, “Hence, politics for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state” (p. 78). Therefore, he never pushed the analysis forward to include the study of leadership as opposed to notions of authority (Tucker, 1995).

Tucker (1995) argues that within political science it was James McGregor Burns who started to move away from the power school to better understand leadership and politics. Leadership within politics started to be understood as what the leader does in terms of providing direction within a group. Tucker (1995) argues that this direction of leadership takes on the directive function of the process. Hence, leadership within the leadership approach as opposed to the power approach is diagnostic in defining a given problem; prescriptive in offering a solution; and mobilizing in influencing individuals to work toward the given solution. This has become an alternative school within political science to provide other avenues of research on leadership. For example, as Tucker (1995) notes, it allows for an analysis of what it is leaders do or what services they provide as well as opening understanding of the process of influence between leaders and followers.

Debates about Culture, Structure and Agency

In considering race, class and gender as important in leadership process, one must consider how we might view these structures and the ability of individuals to act. Sewell (1992) argues that though the concept of structure is often used in sociological study, a precise definition is elusive. Sewell points out that the term “structure” is often used to describe patterns of social life and within the context of the metaphor of the girders of a building meaning that structure is hard and solid. Hays (1994) argues that, by defining structure in a such a rigid manner, it gives the idea that people are “mere robots, programmed to conform to a structured pattern” (p. 61). Within this view of structure, conceptualizing change is difficult and reduces the agentic ability of the individual (Sewell, 1992).

In an attempt to move away from the solid and immovable view of structure, Hays (1994) provides three refinements to the traditional notion. First, structures are the product of human interaction as well as individuals being a product of the social structure. Social structures would not exist without the action of human agents. Creating and maintaining social structures does not imply a willing or even conscious participation. Second, structures have the ability to provide as well as limit opportunity. Finally, stemming from Sewell (1992) Hays points out that structure occurs on different levels. Hays (1994) states, “We might think of the different layers of social structures as more or less hidden from everyday consciousness, more or less powerful in guiding human thought and action, and more or less durable in their resistance to change” (p. 62).

In analyzing both Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s frameworks for structure and agency, Sewell (1992) determines structures are “sets of mutually sustaining schemas and

resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action” (p. 19). But, he points out that structure must never be taken for granted. It is always at risk of change because of various cultural “schemas” available to people and the social interaction that must take place to reproduce the structure. Thus, this view of structures allows for the idea of social transformation.

In terms of agency, Sewell (1992) argues that agency is formed by cultural schemas and the forms of agency will depend upon historical and cultural factors. He argues that Goffman’s 1959 and 1967 works best exhibit the complex process of social interaction in which people engage. Further, knowledge of cultural schemas automatically means that individuals have the capacity to creatively engage with and exercise agency. However, “actors vary in the extent of their control of social relations and in the scope of their transformative powers” (p. 20). Hays (1994) credits agency as the factor that enables the

“creation, recreation and transformation of social structures; agency is made possible by the enabling features of social structures at the same time as it is limited within the bounds of structural constraint; and the capacity of agents to affect social structures varies with accessibility, power and durability of the structure in question” (p. 62).

Finally, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue agency is the

“temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963).

It is not hard to see the relevance of placing leadership in a structure and agency framework. As Sewell (1992) points out, structures “empower” agents differently. There is an inherent power differential in how an individual mediates structure and agency. For

example, literature on gender and leadership shows that societal expectations of leadership are mostly associated with characteristics of men. This societal expectation empowers men differently and hence their ability to act. Furthermore, the interaction of social factors such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, education, etc., provides different “schemas” as well as access and amounts of resources (Sewell, 1992). This likely impacts the ability of an individual to obtain the elected leadership position. But, what is the role of culture in this relationship of structure and agency? Locales and individuals in locales are affected by a particular culture by which they shape their lives. However, within a framework of structure and agency where does culture fit in? Hays (1994) and Swidler (1986) provide useful tools to include culture into a structure and agency framework in the study of leadership.

Hays (1994) argues culture is a social structure. She argues that it is “a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities and externalized in institutions” (p. 65). This is different from many placements of culture in the literature about structure and agency. According to Hays (1994), much of the theoretical treatment of culture places it in contrast with structure. Therefore, culture is not viewed as structured, but rather as soft and subjective and that it is “internal, hidden, and requiring interpretation” (Hays, 1994 p. 58).

In conceptualizing culture as a social structure, Hays (1994) argues that social structure has two connected elements: systems of social relations and systems of meaning. Systems of social relations refer to “patterns of roles, relationships, and forms

of domination according to which one might place any given person at a point on a complex grid that specifies a set of categories running from class, gender, race, education, and religion, all the way to age, sexual preference, and position in the family” (p. 65). Systems of meaning are, “beliefs and values of social groups, language, forms of knowledge and common sense as well as material products, interactional practices, rituals, and ways of life established by these” (p. 65).

Culture as meaning and as relations has potential to significantly impact the individual’s ability to access resources to gain an elected leadership position. This is particularly true for women and minorities. Where they fall in the “grid of categories” in a given community may influence how they maneuver and access resources to achieve elected positions. Considering culture from this frame is extremely useful in gaining an understanding of just how this process takes place.

Also along these lines, Swidler (1986) offers the analogy of culture as a tool kit to mediate and structure action in a society. Her three step framework “offers an image of culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (p. 273). Next, she argues that her framework focuses on “strategies of action” to analyze culture. Third, this framework views culture’s significance in not defining the “ends of action”, but rather in providing a means of analysis that considers the cultural components utilized in the “strategies of action” (p. 273). Furthermore, Swidler (1986), following Geertz (1973), argues that, in order to talk about strategies (agency), we must view culture as accumulated skills, habits and styles. She argues that individuals do not construct action from a clean slate. They construct their actions using already known patterns. Culture

acts as a tool kit from which people select different pieces of their culture to construct action. Swidler (1986) argues for a sociological understanding of how culture “is used by actors, how cultural elements constrain or facilitate patterns of action, what aspects of a cultural heritage have enduring effects on action, and what specific historical changes undermine the vitality of some cultural patterns and give rise to others” (p. 284).

This is most important in considering the research question at hand. Swidler (1986) points out that “culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed. Thus, culture appears to shape action only in that the cultural repertoire limits the available range of strategies of action.” (p. 284).

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that leaders have employed different cultural “tools” to obtain their leadership positions. Furthermore, this work builds on the kind of work Swidler (1986) calls for in exploring how cultural elements and structures impact agency in this case the agency of the individual to attain a formal leadership position.

Oftentimes, culture is left completely out of the study of leadership. Leadership and the processes surrounding even becoming a leader are somehow removed from the context in which it happens. Relationships are discussed and skills that are supposedly needed to be a leader are discussed, but the context and how it impacts this relationship or even how the skills are obtained is often completely left out of the conversation. This is a gap that has too long been ignored.

Cultural theory is important in understanding community leadership processes. If we consider culture as the accepted ways of knowing and doing within a group then we must also accept that there will be different schemes of understanding in communities. Following theorists such as Swidler (1986), culture provides individuals with skills,

habits and styles from which they construct their action. As pointed out by theorists such as Sewell (1992) and Hays (1994) culture can operate as a structure and, in saying so, cultural structures can empower individuals differently in their course of action and within their interactions. Thus, it seems in discussing the various literatures that are important to researching community leadership we are discussing a broader framework that considers structure and agency in particular with the modifications suggested by Hays (1994).

Structuralists such as Giddens and, to a degree, Bourdieu have been criticized for a theory of structuration that does not provide enough consideration of the agency of groups and individuals to change. They seem to rely too much on the idea that structures are constraining and not enough attention provided to the ways structures can be enabling. Hays asserts that structural understandings of processes would be better served to consider that there are several layers of social structures in action at any given time. Further, individuals may or may not be conscious of the ways they are reproducing or changing structure by their actions. Thus, it is important to note that while considering structuring issues such as gender, race, class and culture are important, we must not overly rely on them as means of explanation for all interactions of community leadership.

Gender, Race and Social Class in Leadership

Leadership research that uses community as its context should focus more on structural constraints and opportunities. Furthermore, studies should also consider the leadership stories of individuals who are active in leadership arenas to understand their experiences in leadership. The mainstream debate on race and gender has two competing debates. On one end of the spectrum are researchers that argue there is particularly a

gender difference in how *individuals* lead. They argue women are more prone to use collaborative practices and men more authoritative (Sinclair, 2005). However, other studies have contradicted this research noting there is no statistical difference in how women and men lead. Further, some research argues that once individuals obtain leadership positions there is no statistical difference in how they are perceived by their subordinates.

But, to fully accept the work in largely psychological/managerial situations is to dismiss large areas of research from other disciplines that investigate racial and gender differences in leadership. The differences do not necessarily have to focus on personality traits like much of the psychology leadership literature suggests. As Negrete (1999) points out, much of this literature assumes that individuals regardless of race, gender or class can theoretically obtain power and leadership if they just take advantage of the right opportunities. Sociological perspectives on the other hand take a more critical view in considering the structural constraints as well as opportunities these people may have in even obtaining the “right opportunities.”

Therefore, let us be clear. This work views race, class and gender as contested power relations. As such, these social structures are fluid and not fixed. They “develop in a specific historic context, that defines power relations in society, and that develops within the particular circumstances faced by diverse groups” (Anderson & Collins, 2001). As Anderson and Collins (2001) note, the divisions of powerful and powerless are not clear cut. Those of Caucasian descent do not fit in either/or categories. For example, in this study white men noted their race was a disadvantage in running for office in predominately African American communities. Further, Mayor Bender (as a white

female) spent a great deal of time courting black voters and can be considered as having less power than her male counterparts, but having more power than African Americans running for public office in her town.

The use of race, class and gender as a means of organizing this research serves as a means of critiquing systems of power and privilege (Anderson & Collins, 2001). We must assume that those of differing races, social classes and gender have “different group experiences that also involves addressing issues of power, privilege and equity” (p. 5-6) Therefore, in any study using race, class and gender we must recognize those systems of domination that “permeate society and systematically exploit and control people (Anderson & Collins, 2001 p. 6).

Gender

This section discusses gender and governance in a broader sense. The first section considers the governance of gender mainly focusing on the role of the state in this process. The work of Brush (2003) is relied on heavily. In reading material on gender and governance, it was found that many researchers cited the work used here from Brush. Next, the section outlines other challenges women face in leadership roles. Finally, the weaknesses in leadership and gender research are discussed.

Gender, Governance and other Challenges of Women in Leadership

Brush (2003) asks the question whether political institutions generate and reinforce gender polarization, androcentrism, and biological essentialism. Brush continues to argue that, in short, the answer is yes. Extending the argument further, Brush (2003) points out three different ways in which states and social policies can

govern gender. Further, she argues that these three arguments work simultaneously in society.

The basis of the first argument is that states govern already gendered persons.

Brush (2003) notes,

“Gender blind states face pre-established gender differences and gendered citizen subjects. The claim is not so much that states and social policies are gendered, or that they govern gender, as it is that states govern gendered societies” (p. 53).

Following in line with this argument women and men have different priorities in regard to social policy. The argument posits that they differ in leadership styles, ways of mobilizing followers or constituents, and access to different networks. These differences are less biological and more a result of social and historical locations (Brush, 2003).

“In looking at gender differences and dominance, they result from actions, choices and preferences. They are structured by expectations, opportunities, and struggle rather than by hormones, upper body strength and natural selection. Women and men experience different treatment and outcomes with they run for office, lobby for policy, claim benefits, seek protection.” (Brush, 2003 p. 53).

These differences are experienced because we interact with people who are already “constituted as women and men” (Brush, 2003 p. 54). Therefore, states are simply neutral buffers and referees in an already gendered society. Within this view, the research conducted tends to “measure the gendered effects of governance in terms of women’s relative political weakness” (p. 54). However, there are weaknesses to this argument about gender and governance. They generally place women in a place of fault.

As Brush (2003) notes,

“According to such models, women fail politically because estrogen renders us too compassionate, too timid, or too distracted to compete in the dog eat dog world of politics. Women’s political weakness results from a feminine predilection for domesticity. Or women are

underrepresented where the power is due to choices, as in an apparently natural and perfectly understandable preference for motherhood over equal pay or high heels over running for office” (p. 55).

According to this argument, it is not structural disadvantage or power disadvantage or even the fact laws have even prevented participation by women, rather it is that women are lacking. These models are also lacking also due to their omission of the gendered features of “political organizations, states and social policies” (Brush, 2003 p. 57).

The second lens which is used to view gender and governance is one that posits that states are now gender neutral considering the passage of laws which level the playing field for women. Any differences one might view in terms of gender are the result of a history of women being disadvantaged and not a result of current state structures (Brush, 2003).

These models tend to pursue analysis from a rationale choice perspective. The crux of this argument is that men and women behave in the same rational manner. However, it is the decisions made in the process or struggle to obtain the set goal and not the basis of the exclusion (i.e. gender, race) which causes the differences. In the case of gender, this is particularly problematic as it does not recognize that the norms or choices are based on masculine traits (Brush, 2003). Noting the work of Harvey (1998) which uses this rationale choice approach to viewing gender and governance, Brush says,

“Harvey’s legacy argument occludes the reasons that lack of masculinity has prevented women from conforming to the normative, putatively universal criteria for political participation. Masculinity and its historically variable stereotypical traits (aggressiveness, competitiveness, independence, decisiveness and so on) have consistently been qualifying criteria for leadership, political clout, suffrage, and the like. Harvey cannot account for this fact nor understand why those criteria are the opposed of normal femininity” (p. 62).

Finally, the third way of considering gender and governance is that states are active participants in constructing and maintaining gender differences. This approach also considers gender as a life time achievement and not merely a childhood socialization process (Brush, 2003). Hence, she notes

“Gender is not a trait but a power relation, constituted continually and interactively and circumscribed historically and socially, that people enact throughout their lives and deploy when they build institutions, exercise capacities, and create and perpetuate ideologies that make up the apparatus of rule” (p. 62).

Brush (2003) provides two examples of how this works. First, gender has been grounds for exclusion from a variety of state functions such as citizenship, human and economic rights. Exclusion provides a means of producing difference that regard men and women as unequal members of society. Exclusion in this way reinforces the position of men over women. Brush (2003) notes the means by which social policy is carried out is also gendered. Monson’s (1997) research showed that the work of social workers is gendered. Women were subjected to more questions concerning sexual partners. Further, Monson noted that men were constructed as workers and also made assumptions of what constituted “proper femininity” (Brush, 2003 p. 70).

The next piece of the chapter will outline other challenges women face in leadership positions. Where the previous section discussed the structural challenges of gender and the policies of the state, the following section will focus on those differences that are perceived about men and women and their ability to lead effectively. Finally, the section ends with a conversation about the difficulty of women in leadership positions in maintaining other roles such as motherhood and spouse.

Challenges of Women in Leadership

Jamieson (1995) outlines some challenges women face in leadership positions. She outlines five double binds which women are likely to face. Three of the five are discussed here. The first double bind Jamieson discusses is the womb/brain. She argues that the assumption is made that women are governed by the body and men are treated as if they are governed by the mind. This pits the ability to lead or have a career with the ability to also have a family. Jamieson (1995) also writes that the contemporary thinking is that women cannot successfully achieve in both arenas and one area will suffer at the cost of the other.

Jamieson also discusses the sameness/difference double bind. This bind details the issue of equality versus women being classified as the “other.” Jamieson points out that in some ways the sameness/difference debate has helped women, particularly in politics and in others ways pitted men and women against each other in a zero sum game. In terms of politics, Jamieson notes

“The issue of gender difference has gone from being a liability to an asset. It used to be that a woman candidate’s first goal was getting up to even so that she could compete on a level playing field. You had to prove she was capable of doing the job. Now with public discontent about politics as usual, being in government is no longer an asset. There is unhappiness with conventional politics...women are still considered outsiders” (p. 116).

However, she does little to explore how the woman is received by colleagues particularly men once elected. In terms of the zero sum game, Jamieson argues that “debates over equality versus difference presupposed that empowering women disempowered men” (p. 110). Throughout history, the debate about empowering women has always entailed an argument that to, for example, extend equal pay to women meant men would lose benefit because there would not be enough payroll to cover the extension (Jamieson, 1995).

Finally, Jamieson discusses the femininity/competence double bind. Women often times are caught in a place where they are judged for either being too feminine in dealing with a situation or criticized for being too assertive. Nichols (1993) argues

“If the norm is male, women will always be the other, the deviant. Superior or inferior, she is not the same. She is caught in a catch 22. If she attacks the problem by trying to be male, she will be too aggressive. If she attacks the problem by trying to be female, she will be the ineffective other” (p. 60).

As Jamieson points out, a history of sexual stereotyping of both men and women has contributed to this bind.

Prindeville (2002) and Negrete (1999) among others have demonstrated that individuals involved in leadership activities in communities are aware of challenges pertaining to race, gender and even class in their interactions. As Prindeville (2002) states, “Women in positions of political leadership confront difficulties on account of their gender, while men, most often, do not” (p. 71). Women are still largely considered caretakers of the family and face limitations with balancing both roles of leader and mother/caretaker. Further, for women in many of these studies they were conscious of issues of race/ethnicity, gender and class as important in their political efforts.

Women and Leadership in the Mississippi Delta

There are no current studies on women in elected positions in the Mississippi Delta. However, there is literature that provides a general overview of women in leadership in the South which complements the findings in this research. Goldfield (2002) found that “Southern women lag behind those elsewhere in holding elected office. As of 1997, six of ten states with the lowest percentage of women in the state legislatures were located in the South” (p. 183). Goldfield further notes that this in part reflects the

“persistence of small town and rural political power in the South. Women fare better in more urbanized states and in cities. More traditional views on race and gender persist in the countryside” (p. 183). Female office holders are relatively new to the South. Mississippi was perhaps one of the last states to break the gender barrier with women in politics. In the mid 1980’s Mississippi still had no female mayors. And, it was not until the 1980’s that Mississippi even considered ratifying the nineteenth amendment.

Goldfield (2002) argues that the traditional patriarchal society of the South still governs gender relations in terms of elected leadership. He notes the persistent images of the delicate Southern Belle is particularly detrimental to white women attempting to run for office. He argues this imagery aligns women with being more appropriate to motherhood and being a wife than being involved with “the hurley-burley politics” (p. 184). This cultural factor was apparent in my interview with the one white female mayor in the sample.

In terms of state legislatures, in 2005 approximately nineteen percent of all state legislators in the United States are women. In Mississippi less than fifteen percent of the state legislature is women. Only Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Alabama and South Carolina have lower percentages (Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Sanbonmatsu (2006) notes two reasons why women do not run for office. Within her work the first issue was networks. Respondents discussed challenges breaking into the old boys networks. Next, her work found that party leaders tended to still doubt the electability of women.

Rural women are largely left out of leadership studies and in fact rurality itself is often left out. Though much community research acknowledges that leadership patterns will vary from place to place, it must also hold that rural leadership patterns will differ

from urban patterns and hence it is not likely useful to generalize the urban leadership research to rural areas as has been done in the past (Bourke & Luloff, 1997). Bourke and Luloff note that it may be easier for a woman to be elected to the United States Congress than be elected the county commissioner in a rural area.

In a study conducted in Atlantic Canada on rural women leaders, three themes emerged from all focus groups in regards to challenges to being a woman in a leadership position. Carbert (2006) notes the difficulties in maintaining boundaries between politics and family life, politics and occupations and the overall health of the local economy. Further, Carbert's work highlighted the role of the "reluctant husband" (p. 78) in supporting a wife in running for political office. Finally, the research discussed the gender role constraints as well as the importance of other family members as social support for women once they are elected. Carbert's work mirrors many of the challenges discussed by rural women in the Mississippi Delta. This is further explored in the discussion.

African American women have long been a part of the leadership landscape in the black community. Their work in the Civil Rights Movement was instrumental to its success. However, being recognized for their work was a little more difficult. As Allen (1996) found black women were often relegated to a back seat once it was time for recognition for the work. Allen notes, "studies of the civil rights movement have traditionally focused on a few organizations...and the men who led them...and usually only one or two women are mentioned as having some influence in this historic period" (p. 7). Nevertheless, participation has been a consistent part of African American women's experiences despite the barriers (Smooth, 2006).

Smooth (2006) argues that studies of American political participation are narrow and hence often leave out the contributions of African American women. Much of the work of these women is in grassroots community organizing. However, in the twenty-first century African American women now outpace white women in terms of elected officials. Smooth (2006) found that they hold a larger proportion of elected offices than their white counterparts which is similar to the numerical make up of this study.

Gender and Research

Women have long been left out of leadership studies. Sinclair (2005) argues there are two theories as to why women traditionally have not been the focus of research. The first argument is women are absent from leadership roles particularly in corporate leadership. Holton (1996) states, “despite the occasional ‘achiever’...there are few women at decision-making levels” (p. 57). Thus, many argue that once women garner the qualifications and experience and become part of the leadership structure they will be a part of leadership studies (Sinclair, 2005).

This argument also considers the differences between men and women. Sinclair (2005) rightly points out that much of the leadership literature regarding gender is focused on whether there are measurable differences between men and women leaders. Built into the argument is the assumption that, because men and women are biologically different as well as socialized differently, their leadership abilities will be different. The precipice of the argument is that as women are socialized, in many cases, to be nurturing and that they lack the authority and “toughness” to lead (Sinclair, 2005). Researchers have argued that leadership research on women will catch up once the “pipeline” of

women in leadership is successful. Patience and time will rectify the missing woman in the research (Sinclair, 2005).

The second argument of why women are left out of leadership research focuses on invisibility. Schein et al. (1973; 1975; 1996) have developed research that argues men and women do not lead differently rather they are perceived differently. Sinclair (1995) argues

“Leadership is an attribute that observers readily associate with men. Often, it is only through a conscious act of counter-intuition that they associate it with women. The masculinity of leadership is self-perpetuating—the more men are seen to possess leadership qualities, the more status and influence they are accorded, the more they can command resources, the more formal opportunities as leaders they are offered, and the easier it is for other men to be recognized as having leadership potential. This self-perpetuating loop puts great pressure on women to be like men in order to be judged as real leaders” (p. 25-26).

Therefore, Sinclair (2005) argues that the invisibility of women is not that women are invisible in leadership, but with how leadership is socially constructed by self and others in the organizational environment.

The Evolution of Racial Theory

Winant (2000) defines race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interest in reference to different types of human bodies.” He further notes, “racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process” (p. 172). Niemonen (2002) argues there have been three phases of sociological research in regard to race relations. The first phase was influenced greatly by the work of Gunnar Myrdal (1944). Essentially the argument was that modernization would weed out racism. Or as Niemonen (2002) argues, “Myrdal’s framework was consistent with a view in early social-problems literature which assumed the essential goodness of the

established order and identified deviations from this order as pathological” (p. 14). The issue in racial integration did not rest in societal structures, but rather in the cultural underpinnings of blacks. It was a framework which blamed the individual. Winant (2000) also notes that these theories argued that attitudes of prejudice could be suppressed through “contact, integration, and assimilation; and that discrimination could be ended by laws and regulations that made jobs, education, housing and so on equally accessible by all” (p. 179).

The next phase in race research and theory began in the 1960’s with a renewed interest in the work of Marx. A power/conflict theory orientation was pursued. These power/conflict orientations aided in the advancement of racial theory in several ways. First, unlike previous theories which, as Niemonen (2002) argues “disengaged” racial conflict from its structural roots, conflict theories placed emphasis on the “political and economic dimensions of majority and minority relations” (p. 17). These theories also rejected the notion that individual relationships would eventually improve race relations. However, these theories failed to explain the role of the state since focus was primarily on the role of the modes of production in racial tensions.

The third phase was marked by the publication of Wilson’s (1978) *The Declining Significance of Race*. These theories argued that social class rather than race were better predictors of black life chances and the significance of race was declining. Though a controversial piece, Niemonen (2002) argues that Wilson’s work provided a much needed stimulus in the area of theorizing about race. The shifts in the American economy were of central importance in understanding the rise of the black middle class, the growth of a black underclass and racial tensions. The work placed importance on interracial

solidarity in mediating the effects of prejudice and discrimination. This work became the basis for legislation such as affirmative action (Winant, 2000). However, these theories placed too much faith in the promise of interracial cooperation and did not focus enough on sociocultural and organizational barriers to such cooperation (Winant, 2000).

Though Neimonen (2000) fails to recognize it, there is a fourth phase in theory development of race. It is rooted in the work of Omi and Winant (1994) and Winant (2000) in racial formation theory. Winant (2000) notes

“Today in marked distinction to the situation that obtained before World War II, most states and members of state elites claim to oppose discrimination, deny their continuing adherence to racialized view of their populations, and may even claim to be color blind or differentialist. How and why do racial distinctions endure in such changed circumstances” (p. 180)?

Both the Omi and Winant (1994) and Winant (2000) pieces argue that three elements must be present in future work about race. First, the work must recognize the comparative/historical dimension of race. This is due to the fact that, in 2009, we are still discussing race. We are still discussing race and still must place it within the context of the time. However, as Winant (2000) notes, this provides certain opportunities and challenges. In terms of opportunities, we can gauge how structures, attitudes and relations have changed over time. On the other end, if the goal is generalizability, then this is more difficult to do when focusing on specific contexts or historical periods.

The second element that must be present is the attempt to link the micro and macro links of racial signification and racial social structures (Winant, 2000). Winant notes “a notable and intriguing feature of race is its ubiquity, its presence in both the smallest and the most significant features of social relationships, institutions, and identities” (p. 181). The final element must be recognition of the modes of agency in

reconceptualizing politics. Many race based movements have occurred in American society which have impacted politics. These must be recognized in work about race.

Winant (2000) summarizes the racial formation theory as the following:

“(a) it views the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested; (b) It understands racial formation as the intersection/conflict of racial projects that combine representational/discursive elements with structural/institutional ones; (c) It sees these intersections as iterative sequences of interpretations of the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global” (p. 182).

This work is particularly useful in considering race and the research at hand. In the chapter on the Mississippi Delta, the historical context and political movements of the region are discussed. As noted in the theory about racial formation, the history of the region is very important in understanding the structures both enabling and constraining individuals in the region. Next, individuals in the Delta, though constrained by structures, have also proven to be agentic as many of these black mayors work to achieve social justice. Political movements based on racial inequality have shaped the region. Further, in the conclusions, hopefully, the links will be made between the macro and micro in terms of race and leadership in the Mississippi Delta.

Empowerment, Black Empowerment and Political Incorporation Theory

Above Winant and Omi(1994) argue that the political is important in racial theory. Therefore, this section reviews the concepts of empowerment and the theory of black empowerment. First an overview of the empowerment literature is provided. The question of whether empowerment is a process or outcome is dealt with. Next, the stages of empowerment are considered. Finally, feminist theory is used to further extend the empowerment literature. Empowerment was a central focus of the Civil Rights

Movement that provided the later legal foundations in which opened doors for blacks to participate. It was an important political process in shaping and reshaping racial identity. Using literature from political science black empowerment theory is considered. Black empowerment theory (also known as political incorporation theory) takes the empowerment literature and argues that individuals become empowered, particularly in the political context, once they see others like them being elected. Therefore, it is an important theory to review considering the research at hand.

Pigg (2002) notes that, within the literature, there is much debate in terms of the definition of empowerment and no one definition has been agreed upon. Rowland (1995) argues that much of the issue in defining empowerment is due to the conflict over the root concept—power. Rowland further notes that power can be seen as a resource to get another individual to act and argues this is the type of power located in the decision making process. This type of power is also known as the zero sum game. Boulding (1988) notes three faces of power including threat power, economic power, and integrative power. Pigg (2002) argues that, at its most basic, empowerment is about giving power or power resources to another. Pigg (2002) cites Kabeer (1999) in that empowerment “involves the ability to make choices and entails a process of change from being without (sufficient) power to make choice to having sufficient power to do so” (Pigg, 2002). Finally, Rowland (1995) notes that many of these ideas of power are framed in a neutral way meaning they do not consider such structures as race, gender or other means of oppression. He continues to argue that one’s understanding of empowerment may be directly linked to the understanding of power. But, he notes “in the conventional definition, empowerment must be about bringing people who are outside

the decision making process into it. Empowerment is about individuals being able to maximize the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and the State” (p. 87). Definitions of empowerment in other fields such as social work and education are based on the work of Paulo Freire and the concept of “conscientization.” This term refers to individuals becoming subjects and developing an understanding of their circumstances which in turn leads to social action (Rowland, 1995). Following this understanding, Kaminski et al. (2000) defined empowerment as “a developmental process that promotes an active approach to problem solving, increased political understanding, and an increased ability to exercise control in the environment” (p. 1359).

There is also a debate within the empowerment literature as to whether it is an outcome or a process (i.e. Carr, 2003; Bernstein et al., 1994; Rappaport, 1984). Some have considered empowerment as both (East, 2000). However, most empowerment theorists see it as a process (Gutierrez, 1995, Kaminski et al., 2000; Carr, 2003). Further, the two facets of empowerment include resources and agency (Kabeer, 1999). The resources refer to a myriad of capitals including social, human, and political. These resources are “acquired through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains which make up a society (such as family, market, community)” (Kabeer; 1999 p. 437 in Pigg, 2002 p. 110). Next, agency refers to the ability of individuals to set goals, mobilize and act on the goals. Pigg (2002) notes that within the literature reviewed for his piece, empowerment seemed to focus on three areas. They include: “individual action or self empowerment, organizational or interpersonal

context for empowerment, and social action” (Perkins, 1995 in Pigg, 2002 p. 111; see also Rowland, 1995 for a similar focus).

Carr (2003) further notes that many of the theories of empowerment fail to consider the ways in which conscientization and social action interplay. Working from Alcoff’s (1994) theories of identity as political point of departure and de Lauretis’s (1986) ideas on positionality and identity, Carr (2003) attempts to “highlight the importance of social, historical and political context when theorizing empowerment” (p. 9). She sees empowerment as a cyclical process similar to the idea of praxis. “Thus, stages of empowerment are seen not as linear but as mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses” (p. 13).

Though Carr (2003) argues empowerment is cyclical she notes that it can have a position.

“It is widely assumed that the point of departure in the empowerment process is a position of human misery, whether it is termed powerlessness, oppression, or deprivation. Both theorists of empowerment and feminists have sought to explicate this starting position by considering socioeconomic factors on the one hand, and psychological factors on the other hand. However, although they have both emphasized the importance of understanding the material reality of oppression, most of them have insisted that problems of disenfranchisement and barriers to empowerment are primarily political, not psychological. In terming powerlessness as a position I evoke the idea of multiple possible locations that correspond with the diversity of different people’s lived realities and suggest the inherently changeable nature of positionality” (p. 13-14).

Carr (2003) once again notes that much of the work on empowerment stems from Freire and understanding “the stage of conscientization during which individuals come to understand the political dimensions of their personal problems and act accordingly” (p. 9). This is the second part of the empowerment process. According to Carr,

“Conscientization is simultaneously an analytical, constructive, and mobilizing process that is crucial to the realization of empowerment. Conscientization is inherently analytical in that it works to interpret the structures and discourses that frame people’s experiences. It is also constructive or creative, for as people begin to understand such power-laden structures and discourses, they can begin to seek alternative terrain, conceiving of other possible subject positions” (p. 15).

For Carr, conscientization forms identity through the interpretation process. In this interpretation process, the individual must interpret the effects of oppression through their personal experiences. Within interpretation, not only does the desire for change matter, but the historical juncture also has an effect on whether change can occur (Carr, 2003). In terms of identity, Carr works from Alcoff (2004) in that through interpretation identities are created and recreated. Following de Lauretis (1986) she argues that identity is a process. Identity is partially a product of a given historical period. That history is interpreted and reinterpreted. The process of consciousness is never “fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change within historical conditions” (deLauretis, 1986 in Carr, 2003). The final piece to Carr’s empowerment process is mobilization. Through consciousness raising new possibilities for the future are envisioned and the empowerment process moves toward social action (Carr, 2003).

Carr’s work on empowerment is much more dynamic than other works read on empowerment during this process. She provides a framework which is useful in considering the ways in which the participants in this dissertation study discuss empowerment. As will be demonstrated in the analysis and discussed in the concluding chapter, the historical junction in which the individuals are located greatly affected the notion of empowerment as well as the ways in which they saw themselves involved in the empowerment process. It is now important to turn focus to black empowerment theory.

Black Political Empowerment/Political Incorporation Theory

African Americans have made considerable strides in the political arena in terms of being elected. According to the National Conference of Black Mayors, in 2003 there were over 500 black mayors nation wide. This is a considerable change considering in 1990 there were only 314 and in 1970 only 81 (www.ncmb.org). At the national level, there are currently forty-two black members of the US Congress though only one is a Senator (http://thecongressionalblackcaucus.lee.house.gov/member_info.html). Within the White House itself, only five blacks had served in the presidential cabinet prior to the Bill Clinton administration. Clinton appointed seven blacks to the cabinet and Bush appointed four. However, it was during the Bush administration that provided another first for African Americans. With the appointment of Colin Powell, he became the first president to appoint a person of color to one of the top four most powerful positions in the cabinet (<http://www.jackandjillpolitics.com/2008/11/blacks-in-the-white-house-clinton-bush-obama/>). Of course, 2008 saw the election of the United State's first minority president. Two African Americans have been appointed to the Supreme Court (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006). Thus, in obtaining elected and even some appointed positions, blacks have seen success since the Civil Rights Movement. However, how have these strides been treated theoretically?

Black empowerment theory is concerned with racial differences in political participation. Like the sociological field of research on race, political science also is varied. Bobo & Gilliam (1990) note that early race research with the field focused on factors such as education, occupation status and income as predictors of political behavior. In this work, researchers often found that blacks actually participated at higher

levels than whites when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status. Hence, the field moved on to develop psychological theories to explain the pattern. First, the field developed compensatory theory which argues that blacks become over engaged in organizations and the political arena to overcome feelings of inferiority placed on them by white society (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990). The next theory is an ethnic community approach positing that being a part of a disadvantaged community creates group attachment leading to group norms that spur political action to improve conditions (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990). However, these theories have been replaced with work in the area of black political empowerment.

Bobo & Gilliam (1990) define black political empowerment as “the extent to which a group has achieved significant representation and influence in political decision making” (p. 379). In their much cited piece “Sociopolitical Participation and Black Empowerment,” Bobo & Gilliam note that blacks have made great strides in moving into decision making circles particularly at the mayoral level. They note that the attainment of such positions is particularly important to black political empowerment because the election of an African American signals high levels of political organizing and also the position itself carries decision making capacities and control over resources (see also Browning, Marshall, and Tabb, 1984). They argue that moving into these positions should empower other African Americans to become engaged in politics. Their research found that in areas where blacks are present in the political structure other blacks are more active and participate at higher levels than whites of comparable socioeconomic status. They also found that empowerment (remember, in political science this means the extent to which a group has achieved representation) leads to higher levels of political

knowledge which leads to a “more engaged orientation to politics” (p. 387). They dismiss the past argument that high levels of participation are caused by viable black candidates. They note that when they conducted their work in the 1980’s using the General Social Survey; blacks already had a history of participation. Instead, they suggested shifting theoretical understanding of black participation behavior. They note the theories of the 1950’s and onward explained black participation as an attempt to gain basic inclusion in the political system. Therefore, Bobo & Gilliam further argue that the significance of race in sociopolitical behavior has changed. Rather than declining they note “It is more accurate, then, to conclude that race now shapes sociopolitical behavior in different ways and for somewhat different reasons than held in the past” (p. 388).

In the years since Bobo & Gilliam’s important work, black political empowerment theory has continued to shape the research agenda in regards to race within political science. Harris et al. (2005) note that “black political successes brings new black voters into the electorate, nurture feelings of political efficacy and trust in government, stimulate feelings of group consciousness, and mobilize black constituencies (Barker & Walters, 1989; Leighley, 2001;). However, Harris et al. (2005) note that African Americans obtaining elected positions have done little to impact the economic well-being of blacks. But, black political empowerment theory does not explain fully the behavior of black mayors in our study so it is now appropriate to shift the conversation to social class.

Social Class

There is much debate within sociology about whether the concept of class is even still relevant for social research. It has been postmodernists which have claimed the death of social class. Weeden & Grusky (2005) note,

“Most notably, postmodernist critics have argued that class analysis has failed to deliver on the new microlevel agenda, in large part because attitudes and behaviors arise from a ‘complex mosaic of taste subcultures’ that are unrelated to class membership (Pakulski and Waters 1996 p. 157) These critics conclude that the concept of social class, while useful for explaining behavior in the early industrial period, is an intellectual dead end that misrepresents the ‘basic fissures that define the contours of social life’ (Kingston, 2000 p. 210-212). The postmodern critique implies that social action is increasingly individualistic and that any remaining institutional constraints on action (e.g., religion, gender, race) are generated largely outside the site of production. We use the term site of production to refer to the social organizational setting within which goods and services are produced” (p. 142).

Scott (2002) notes that the critics of class analysis are not without their merits. Class analysis does not provide a complete frame for analysis but does not mean it should be abandoned. Two issues are noted within the literature in terms of the reasons social class may not provide as much explanatory power in the twenty-first century. First, Weeden & Grusky (2005) note that the issue is likely within the operationalization of class. Scott (2002) notes that,

“We are witnessing not so much the death of class as a restructuring of class relations and their supplementation by new sources of social division and social identity. Class relations still exist and exert an effect on life chances and conditions of living, so there is still a role for appropriate forms of class analysis” (p. 31).

However, how has class been conceptualized within sociology prior to the postmodern critique? Scott (2002) notes that much of the focus on social class stems from the Weberian view. Weber (1946) conceptualized class as those with the same “life

chances” represented by material goods under the labor markets. Material property, for Weber, is the most important life chance. He notes, “Property and lack of property are, therefore, the basic categories of all class situations” (p. 182). Scott (2002) notes that Weber also recognized non-economic sources of life chances. He further notes that Weber’s work on status and class are most important in contemporary society. Status also affects the life chances of the individual, although indirectly, in the ways honor works in social situations (Wright, 2004).

Status relations originate in the distribution of prestige or social honor within a community when people judge one another as superior or inferior in relation to their values, and so give or withhold reputation and accord a particular standing with a person’s way of life (Weber, 1946 p. 30).

Sociology has also used a Marxist conceptualization of social class. Linking life chances to that of the location to the means of production, the work of Wright and Goldthorpe is often cited. Class distinctions are often based on categories such as “capitalists”, “workers”, and also “service class” but, most importantly, they relate to the site of production. Weeden & Grusky (2005) note that these conceptualizations of class are known as “big classes” and leave much to desire in terms of truly delineating the effects of class.

I contend that social class is still an important concept to consider in social research. The notion that we are simply seeing a redefinition of class is much more appropriate than simply dismissing the concept all together and hailing it “dead.” As Scott (2002) notes, there is still much good work showing the ways social class affects people. First, he notes research which shows the links between health and class. Citing research of Payne & Payne (2000), it was found that unskilled (lower class) workers are more likely to experience health issues such as problems with eyesight, hearing and

dental. Further, Rose & Pevalian (2000), in what Scott (2002) considers a “most careful and sophisticated investigation,” have shown the effects of social class on mortality when class is measured in terms of employment relations. Educational outcomes are often linked to social class as well. Reed (1998) found in Great Britain nearly seventy five percent of those children from the working class do not go onto to higher education where only one percent of the professional class children do not go onto higher education. Finally, social class can be linked to political behavior. Hout et al. (1999) found that within the United States white collar and professionals can be linked to the Democratic Party while the self-employed and those in manual labor positions were found to support the Republican Party.

I am not sure whether the significance of social class is declining. For every article read that argued for its decline there was an article citing its importance. Rather, the approach of this dissertation study is to agree with Weeden & Grusky (2005) when they argue for a more comprehensive means of measuring social class.

“The main purpose of a refurbished class scheme, we argue is to identify structural positions at the site of production that provide the strongest possible signal of life conditions, where this refers to the panoply of circumstances that define the quality and character of our social lives, including the economic flows and resources that we control, our institutional affiliations and commitments, the types of lifestyles that we lead, and our sentiments and attitudes. We are thus looking for an information-rich class map that represents the geography of social structure by describing important differences between structural locations” (p. 143).

African Americans and Social Class

Since this research deals with African American and Caucasians it is important to understand how theorists have defined the black middle class. Ginwright (2002) points out that most often the African American middle class is defined either through economic

(Landry, 1987) or social/cultural (Rose, 1997) factors. But, there are two issues that most agree are problematic when defining the black middle class. First, there is considerable class fragmentation in the number of different professions, incomes and educational levels one can find in what some consider the black middle class. Next, there are the economic shifts that move blacks from the white collar positions to blue collar and back again (Ginwright, 2002). Therefore, in order to address these issues, Ginwright (2002) defined the black middle class both in terms of economics and cultural. In terms of economics, “the black middle class are those who share similar occupational identities through intellectual labor, rather than manual labor” (p. 547). He makes this distinction because income can “obscure conceptual differences between working and middle class culture. He notes the work of Hochschild (1995) who found the black middle class fashions much of their identity through their educational attainment and occupation. However, for the working class, their job is a means to gain an income and not necessarily tied to their identity. These differences in occupational identity create differing values, beliefs and behaviors which lend to the cultural category. I find Ginwright’s (2002) definition as one that most fits the research at hand due to the two conceptual categories.

As previously mentioned, African Americans have made considerable progress in terms of accessing political resources. However, the economic progress has not matched the political. Since the Civil Rights Movement, the African Americans middle class has grown. However, the black working class and poor suffer economic distress (Harris et al., 2005). Contributing to the issue, as middle class blacks became more affluent and anti-discrimination laws took affect, they left the inner cities that used to bind them to

that location. Further, low skill and semi-skilled jobs also left the cities enhancing the conclaves of poverty within them (Harris et al., 2005; Wilson, 1980). Others have argued that, as the middle class has left these areas, it has taken with them important social and cultural capital resources which further affect the conditions of these neighborhoods (Ginwright, 2002; Anderson, 1999). However, Patiillo and McCoy (2000) found that middle class blacks do not necessarily sever their ties within these neighborhoods or communities as they are still members of the churches, non-profit organizations and involved in civic engagement activities.

Social class can produce diverse ideological positions within the African American community. Tripp (1987) found that as blacks move up the social class ladder, their political and ideological perspectives on how to affect social issues changes. Stemming from Bourdieu's concept "habitus," Rose (1997) notes that social class is experienced through internalizing values, beliefs, and strategies. Therefore, this internalization also affects how that individual interprets their environment as well as the available resources through which to affect social change (Ginwright, 2002). Dawson (1994) argues the "black community is literally divided into the haves and the have nots, those who have steady jobs and those who do not" (p. 43); hence this influences black public opinion (Harris et al. 2005). Ginwright (2002) put this ideological difference in the language of Goffman (1984) and the notion of frames. They argue that the black poor classes or working classes frame issues in terms of the material reality. They are concerned with meeting everyday needs. Most often the strategies include ways of gaining access to power and resources. Their work has found that the black middle class uses a cultural frame in terms of framing social problems. For example, they are more

likely to challenge ideals and values since they are stable in their incomes, jobs, etc. Tripp (1987) also found that as blacks move up the social ladder they are likely to be more conservative in how to address issues and create change unlike the lower class which is likely to be more militant. Ginwright (2002) also found that when those of the black middle class and lower class work together on issues, there is conflict in the framing process. The work found that the black middle class was likely to overlook the immediate needs of the lower class. This strained the relationships of those working together because of the ideological differences.

Harris et al. (2005) note that numerous scholars have discussed the impact of economic polarization and political participation in black communities (Cohen & Dawson, 1993; Harris 1999; Hochschild, 1995). Hochschild (1998) notes that during the 1990's the political, social, economic and demographic gaps of African Americans was immense. This also impacts the question of how successful black empowerment (defined in the sense of political science) has been if there are these wide disparities. Harris et al. (2005) set out to research this question. They found in terms of black empowerment, southern men are more likely to participate as the number of black political officials increases, bolstering the black political empowerment theory. However, for black women economic distress is the weightier factor in participation rather than black empowerment. When there is more economic stress, black women are less likely to participate in the political process. Further, in general Harris et al. (2005) found for all blacks, as income inequality increased, the rate of participation decreased hence overshadowing the progress of black political empowerment.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

From this exploratory study I learned a great deal about how race, class and gender help shape leadership experiences. This research also discovered some important social institutions such as church, family and community in the leadership learning process which have not been explored in the research to date. African American participants also discussed leadership as a cause mainly in the form of social justice. Participants discussed how race and gender operate in their leadership experiences in the Mississippi Delta. Though no participants specifically spoke about social class, the analysis brings forth experiences that are reflective of social class. Finally, participants explored the challenges associated with leading and maintaining a family life. However, one must be careful in drawing conclusions about the findings in this work. As previously discussed, it is exploratory. Any one of the areas discovered above can be fashioned into a project in and of itself. This discussion will focus on ways this work fits into the literature and ways the work may be expanded in the future to better understand what is happening in the Mississippi Delta in regard to leadership, race, class and gender.

This chapter makes the connections between what the participants told the researcher about their experience and what the academic literature can contribute to our understanding of the experiences of these Delta leaders. First, the chapter focuses on the structure and agency of participants. Within the frame of structure and agency, the extent to which structures such as race, class and gender are enabling and constraining participants is discussed. Next, the discussion moves to explore how participants consider themselves agentic and what can the literature on empowerment say about that

process. It was clear from the analysis that African Americans discuss a process of empowerment which is like the work of Paulo Friere. Their conversations denote an understanding of leadership as working toward social justice. Next, black political empowerment theory is critiqued in terms of how it seems to operate in the Mississippi Delta. This chapter also considers the role of the church in the maintenance and evolution of social structures such as race and gender in the Mississippi Delta.

Leadership as a socially constructed learning process is discussed next. The role of social institutions such as church, family and community are discussed. This chapter will also outline the ways in which traditional leadership theory can aid in future research on the Mississippi Delta. The chapter ends with a discussion of ways this study contributes to these bodies of literature as well as the limitations to this study. It also ends with a discussion of how this work may be used to better construct leadership development programs in the region since I have long evaluated such programs.

Exploring Structure and Agency

Participants largely viewed themselves as agentic. They placed themselves as active agents in understanding the world around them and making decisions to navigate that world. Interviewees also discussed those barriers which impeded their ability to fully act in their leadership role. As Mayor Green noted in his interview, particularly African Americans in the Mississippi Delta had experiences which shaped their thinking in regard to actively seeking out those opportunities to prepare for leadership roles. He notes that the experiences of his generation (i.e. segregation) caused them to seek out opportunities to lead and develop skills.

However, to what extent do the social structures of the Mississippi Delta constrain or enable individuals? As Sewell (1992) points out, actors vary in the extent of control over both social relations and ability to transform social structure.

Race

By providing a historical and political account of the Mississippi Delta to understand race relations, this study has included those components that Winant (2000) argues are most important when studying race. What this study showed is race was clearly both constraining and enabling among the participants. Winant (2000) notes that even though as a society we try to maintain that we are “color blind”, racial distinctions endure and in the Mississippi Delta they serve to enable some individuals while constraining others. Discussions of race were a part of the majority of interviews. In some ways, race was enabling for both blacks and whites. For African Americans, the understanding of racial inequality served as a stimulus for organizing in order to elect someone who they felt would represent their interests. Cases were presented to show that some communities mobilized based on race in order to change the complexion of the leadership structure or maintain the leadership structure. Further, African American participants noted that, for many communities, it was perceived that voicing concerns was constrained due to race relations. Mayors Turner, Green and Cooley all discussed ways in which race operated in a constraining manner in even accessing city hall as a citizen. They noted seeing frustration in black citizens who felt they could not access their local government nor did not feel local government was meeting their needs. Mayor Green noted his observation that the white minority was leading the black majority and the office of mayor was largely not accessible to blacks to voice concerns.

Participants also discussed how race was constraining in running for office. Mayors Turner, Jones and Cooley noted that, though they had been active participants in the political system serving on city council, once they attempted to run for mayor race was an issue. The literature on gender and leadership notes that citizens also have a role in maintaining understandings of what leadership “looks like.” Within this study, this same finding applies to race. Mayor Cooley summarizes it best, “there is always a feeling that certain people, in this case blacks, are not qualified for the job because they have never had the job” (p. 87). Mayor Turner shared that within the community there was the perception the town would “fall apart” if a black were to become mayor. Leaders argued the perceptions of citizens in some cases about race and leadership served as constraints and also can be viewed as maintaining the social structure of race by actively resisting the election of blacks to the office. Mayor Green discussed ways he felt the power elite attempted to discredit his campaign and Mayor Lay noted that during his experience the white community turned out in large numbers to maintain a white in office.

Interviewees also discussed in detail the challenges of overcoming racial barriers once entering the office of mayor. Participants discussed ways that race was constraining in carrying out their agenda. Mayor Jones noted the power of white landowners in their ability to stop an agenda. In some cases, interviewees noted that they knew they would not receive white community support (Mayor Meredith). Others, like Mayor Lay, noted the challenge of getting the community to cross racial barriers and work together on community issues. Mayor Lay noted that whites and blacks in the same community do not support each other’s events. Therefore, race is not only constraining at the micro

level in how individuals interact, but also by continuing to maintain macro level structures of race in terms of making working toward larger community goals more difficult. Mayor Lay noted this in a discussion about a charter school in his community. The participants noted in many ways how the culture of the community is to largely remain separated based on race. Mayors Turner and Meredith discussed the ways their communities were still divided. Others discussed trying to be a leader to two separate communities—one white and one blacks.

Caucasian males also discussed ways they felt race was constraining. These cases were interesting because these men were elected in towns where African Americans are the majority. They argue their election is an example of the changing culture of the Mississippi Delta in electing the best person for the job rather than focusing on race. How much of this is true is unknown. There are no known studies on towns which have elected their “firsts,” and continued to elect African Americans to office for some extended period, and then elected white males back into a position. Whether this is a true change in culture is unknown because the town was not the site of study, but these towns do present questions in terms of the ways race relations may be evolving in some areas. This will be further discussed in the section on social class as these three individuals share certain characteristics that can be attributed to class.

But, no matter the frustrations with the structure of race, participants—both white and black—talked about the ways in which they were working to better race relations. They discussed working with community members to create opportunities for socialization that cut across racial lines. Most often community events such as festivals and holiday activities were discussed. However, it is unclear how much impact these

activities have on the racial structure of the Delta. Participants discuss these activities as changing relationships, but whether these events actually change the culture of race in the Delta cannot be determined from this study. Further research on the impact of interracial activities on overall community attitudes about race would help understand the impacts of such undertakings at the local level. As Foster (1989) pointed out, social change does not always have to occur at a larger societal level. Thus, leaders may very well be making changes in their Delta community that maybe would not be reflected in considering the entire Delta region.

Mayor Lay saw being a white man as enabling during his election experience. His experience demonstrates the importance of putting race into a historical and political context. He recognizes that he ran for mayor during a time when whites were not yet ready to see an African American in office. Therefore, in Mayor Lay's eyes, white citizens mobilized to elect him because they wanted to maintain the leadership structure. Often participants would use the phrase "the community was not ready to elect a black." However, what does this mean? Though no participant discussed it explicitly we can assume it means white are not ready to relinquish power and control.

Wilson (1978), and work that follows his reasoning, argues that race is declining in significance in terms of the life chances of African Americans. In some ways, this is true. African Americans have more economic opportunity as demonstrated by the demographics of the mayors interviewed. But, it should be noted that the region as a whole is not necessarily better off economically as demonstrated with the statistics in Chapter three. However, race is still clearly shaping relationships in the Mississippi Delta. The fact that race was discussed in all interviews in some way is significant. I

was very careful not to prompt in terms of race, rather asking participants to discuss challenges in both running for office and once they won. In terms of discussing challenges, stories concerning race were often shared. However, participants clearly saw themselves as acting to improve race relationships in the Delta. Sometimes they viewed their impact in terms of simply being elected or actively organizing to bring people together. Though from a sociological perspective, we can see how race is still acting as a constraint on individuals, participants, for the most part, take the view that continued action in these areas will improve race relationships.

Gender

It was also clear from the research that the women in this study had a very different set of experiences when running for office and challenges once they were elected. These challenges included ability to exert authority over male boards and workers, balancing home and public life, and presenting themselves as viable candidates for the position. Therefore, the experiences of these women will be compared to the literature on governance and gender. It is clear from the research that the social structure of gender relations in the Mississippi Delta constrains women in their role as leader.

But, first it is important to note that the trends found in this research in terms of demographics are similar to those found in other work. African American women clearly outpace Caucasian women in running for and attaining the office of mayor in the Delta. The fact that the sample counties only had one white woman to achieve that position is significant. Since the study ended however, another white woman was elected within the sample counties. Authors such as Goldfield (2002) argue that more traditional views of gender roles exist in rural areas. Mayor Heron noted that her husband thought she should

be home more as she was always attending community meetings pertaining to her role as mayor. Mayors Ray and Turner also noted the role of caretaker still impinges on them.

Women discussed the difficulties of maintaining the multiples roles of mother, spouse and leader in this study. Like the rural women of Carbert's 2006 study, they discussed the role of the "reluctant husband." They expressed how their spouse either did not want them to run for office or were absent in helping to care for the house and children once the women were elected. This is similar to the findings of Prindeville (2002) and Negrete (1999) which argue that women often experience difficulties in political leadership that are a result of gender such as the role conflict.

Women in this sample also discussed the social networks which men have access to that women are perceived not to have. Sanbonmasu (2006) makes reference to this issue in her work. In this study, Mayor Bender noted that she is at disadvantage even as mayor because she knows, as a woman; she cannot join the men at the coffee shop. Mayor Gray noted that she is the only woman at the table during county board meetings. She shared that there have been times when the all male board has tried to tell her what the town did and did not need while not questioning her male counterparts. Brush (2003) notes that social policy is gendered. From Mayor Gray's case we can see how that may operate. Through the county board's action of not questioning her male counterparts and suggesting she did not know the needs of the community she led (by asserting she "didn't need all that" pg. 80), the board makes the assumption that they know better. According to Mayor Gray this was due to her gender.

Mayor Bender also provided an interesting example of being a Southern woman in a leadership position. In her case it seemed to be a contradiction of roles: the white

southern woman vs. the role she needs to play as mayor of the town. Southern women are not supposed to be “aggressive”, yet she is a direct and bold individual in her dealings with day to day city business. As Goldfield (2002) points out Southern culture portrays a certain view of white women as fragile and not being appropriate for elected position. As mentioned previously, white women also serve in fewer elected positions in the South than African American women. What is causing these numbers to lag behind? Much more research is needed to understand why these women are not either running for office or not being elected. The work also needs to help determine whether the Southern culture has any affect on white women entering public office.

For other women interviewed they saw gender as an advantage in public office in terms of how they interact with constituents. Though much of the research on gender and leadership points out that leadership is most often associated with “toughness” (Sinclair, 2005), when discussing gender as an advantage, they say this is precisely why they have the advantage. They argue that one must nurture their constituents. Several women also discussed the importance of creating an office environment that was conducive to making visitors feel welcome and comfortable. In particular, Mayors Bender and Turner discussed the need to change the décor in their office immediately away from the harsh wood paneling and large dark furniture to lighter colors. They also discussed viewing the community through a different lens than their male counterparts. This was mostly cited in terms of seeing the aesthetic features of the community (Mayor Ray pg. 82).

Women were often surprised at the role gender played in their election. It seemed that African American women expected race to be an issue and were taken back when gender superseded race in some areas. As Mayor Turner noted (p. 78-79), she was

shocked that her twelve years of experience on the city council did not seem to matter. Rather she was portrayed as being a “puppet” of two powerful men and not able to lead in her own right. Many of these women expressed irritation that, as a woman, they needed to prove themselves, but it was taken for granted that men could lead. As Sinclair (2005) notes, due to the cultural assumptions about leadership, it is easier to see men filling the role of leader. But, these women were clearly upset by the notion. They brought their fists down on desks during these conversations and their voices were raised.

The fact that men talked very little about gender or their roles as father and husbands in the process is revealing. It is clear that gender is enabling for them in that they do not have to be concerned that their gender could be a weapon in the political arena. Of the twelve men interviewed, only two noted they would not have run for office if their children were still at home. Of the six women interviewed, five noted they would not have run for office when their children were young. Most went into public service after their children were out of the house or were teenagers and better able to care for themselves. The bind of the womb/brain that Jamieson (1995) discussed fits here. The women in this sample did not feel they could serve as mayor and fully care for their family. They noted feelings of guilt if too much of their time was taken in city matters that hindered them from fully fulfilling the role of mother.

However, unlike race, where obvious efforts were made to create community activities to attempt racial reconciliation, there was little discussion of ways female mayors worked to change the structure of gender relations. Most noted that they simply had to work hard to prove they could handle the job. In pondering this finding, even I had to consider that in the leadership development programs I evaluate gender is not

discussed as a topic. The programs always have sessions on “diversity” but this takes the form of race relations. Much has been done in the Delta to attempt changes in race relations, but one does not see concentrated efforts to change cultural notions about gender roles which are clearly constraining despite that the average enrollment of females in these some programs was approximately sixty percent (Lovell, 2008).

Social Class

Few interviews directly dealt with social class. As noted in the review of literature, social class can be considered many ways. This section will discuss social class in a few ways. First, we will consider as one aspect of social class the individual’s occupation and access to resources. Next, we will consider social class as values and attitudes stemming from occupations and access to those resources (Ginwright, 2002).

In terms of occupations, most of the mayors in this sample could be labeled middle class. They were business owners, teachers, involved in the legal field, funeral home directors and non-profits. The group is highly educated. As mentioned previously, within the sample seventy-nine percent attended college as compared to only approximately thirteen percent Delta wide. Though they have clearly achieved middle class status based on occupation and educational levels, most came from lower class backgrounds. They reported their parents were laborers or domestics and noted the financial difficulties with which their parents dealt. With the exception of Mayor Banks and Mayor Lay, all described their background as lower class. This is significant as in the past most of the elected officials in the Mississippi Delta came from the elite (Austin, 2006).

Rogers (2006), who conducted work in three of the same counties as this work, found a relationship between land ownership and African American leadership. In interviews and other research conducted in the mid-1990's with African American Civil Rights participants (one generation older than many of these participants in most cases), Rogers notes the relationship between land ownership and those individuals who became community leaders. She notes,

“The importance of land ownership for financial independence from white control, and from the oppressive conditions of sharecropping, tenancy, and indebtedness was emphasized by many narrators. All of those who became community leaders between the 1950s and the 1990s came from families that had the resources and the will to avoid the entrapment of dependency and that nurtured in their children a burning desire to become educated and to improve their own lives” (p. 89)

Rogers (2006) also notes that this landowning class became a stratified group of African Americans in the Delta. In this sample, eleven out of fourteen of the African Americans in this sample were elected after 2000. Further, of the eleven African Americans elected, only two come from these early land owning families. The remainder discusses their parents' plantation, sharecropping and laborer backgrounds. Therefore, at least in this sample, individuals from these backgrounds were elected. Being from these early land owning and “upper class” black families does not hold true. Though they are clearly in the middle class now, they did not start here. They come from the new black middle class discussed in Duncan (1999). More research is needed to better understand what seems to be a shift from the generation immediately following the civil rights movement and the commonality of landownership and positional leadership and this younger generation where it does not seem to be a factor.

Most often I saw social class intersecting with either race or gender. Mayor Banks discussed coming from an influential family in his interview. He would be the only interviewee that could be considered a part of the elite. He is wealthy and tied into the networks with some of the most influential white landowners in the Delta who also held office at the national level. At a young age he was hand picked to lead the hunting club, one of the most influential institutions in the community. However, he never discussed these as enabling. He noted that he had to work hard and be strong and independent. However, it is clear that his social class and the networks which come with it worked in his favor. He discussed going to Washington, D.C. to meet with the influential Deltans about issues in his community and coming home with checks to address issues. However, he does note that he hasn't done that for a long time. With those individuals now out of office, he no longer has access. But, he does talk about the influence the hunting club still has on community politics. This community is still grooming their leaders from the hunting club. It is interesting because he still believes that either an African American or woman could become mayor of his town though he readily acknowledges the private hunting club is a means of producing community leaders. Once again, we can see how race and gender can be constraining in some communities no matter how much the leaders argue their community is beyond racial divides.

As mentioned previously, three white men were elected in towns where the majority population is black. It is interesting that the three white males who were elected all were raised within a lower social class. They discussed in their interviews how they could relate to the community because they had also experienced a hard upbringing.

More research would be needed to really explore this relationship, but this research at least asks a new question in terms of race and social class in the Mississippi Delta. Are African Americans more willing to elect a Caucasian who shares a similar upbringing economically than someone with an elite background? Theoretically it makes sense, but it is also a question of whether this can become a trend or these three are the exception.

In the situation of Mayor Bender, the white female, social class operates as an enabler in the position even though she is a woman. She does at least have access to those men in the good old boy network though she does not feel it is appropriate to join them for coffee in the mornings. But, as a woman she does not always have as much access as might be needed.

Ginwright (2002) and Weeden & Grusky (2005) note that, in considering social class, one must consider both the economics and social/cultural. Ginwright (2002) makes the argument that social class can create differences in values and beliefs. He further notes this in regard to the African American community between those of the working or laborer class and those of the professional middle class. Tripp (1987) noted that as African Americans moved up the social ladder, they took a different view on how to create social change. They were more apt to discuss values and beliefs while the working class is more concerned with material needs. In the analysis, African American mayors discussed the difficulties of working within African American communities. These participants talked about changing “mind sets” which is in line with Tripp’s argument about how the black middle class views social change. However, these same mayors also note the difficulties of conveying this message when their constituents are concerned with community centers, etc. (or rather the material). Mayors Simpson and Hughes provided

examples of this tension. Mayor Simpson discussed the challenge in getting people to change the mindset when it comes to educational attainment. Mayor Hughes recalled an argument with his wife where he clearly demonstrated a middle class attitude in terms of arguing that his police would not have to “harass” the community if parents just stayed at home and looked after their children. His wife argued that by placing white police on the street it was forcing submission of blacks to whites. There were clearly different ideological views among those African American middle class serving in positions of mayor and the constituents they served.

The literature and comments from participants led the researcher to question whether social class is creating a conflict in how these mayors are able to work in their town. The mayors are clearly framing the issues their community faces differently than their constituents as demonstrated by Mayors Hughes and Simpson. This research leads to interesting questions about the way in which social class may work in rural African American communities although it cannot say definitively that social class is the primary influence in these cases. If we agree with Ginwright (2002), Tripp (1987) and even the theorists on structure, agency and culture we can see how structures enable and constrain individuals differently. Further, if we consider Swidler’s (1986) cultural tool kit, we can see that individuals in the middle class and working class will have a different set of tools in which to frame issues and solutions. As mentioned before, more work would be needed to tease out the finer points and determine if and how social class, particularly among African Americans, operates in the Delta.

Empowerment and Black Political Empowerment Theory

Though no participants actually used the term empowerment, in analyzing the ways in which they discussed community issues and their thought process for running for office it was clear that it resembled the literature on empowerment. Freire (1978) discusses the process of conscientization or the ability to understand the social, historical and political circumstances of their life which leads to social action. African American mayors discussed this process in great detail as they shared why they ran for public office. They note recognition of the history, time and events that have lead to the status of African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. They also noted people from their life course that were important in conveying these messages about social action including pastors and the influence of the Civil Rights Movement. Mayors Green, Cooley, Turner and Heron were used to demonstrate the language used that lead the researcher to believe processes of empowerment were happening (pgs. 72, 77, 85, 86).

Working from Carr's (2003) three part empowerment process, the first step is recognizing positionality. Most often the mayors recognized their positions in terms of race and power in the Mississippi Delta. Mayor Turner recognized that many in her city felt removed from city hall as the mayor was white and they were black. Mayor Green realized that, in his town, the thirty percent of whites were leading and the seventy percent of blacks were following. Mayor Cooley felt the white city government was overlooking the needs of the black community. In this process, most often social inequality was recognized in terms of a stimulus to organize. Gender and social class did not stimulate such thinking or an obvious conscientization process. Participants were clearly interpreting "the structures and discourses that frame people's experiences" (Carr,

2003 p. 15) even if they could not verbalize it in these terms. As they understood the location of power, they chose the course of action best for them and, in the case of this research, it was running for public office.

However, once in office what affect did their empowerment have? Bobo & Gilliam (1990) define black political empowerment as not only the ability to elect African Americans to elected office but to also have access to decision making arenas. Though these individuals had been elected to public office, there still remained barriers to the influence and decision making circles. Austin (2006) notes in her work on Tunica County, MS that blacks obtained positions that held little influence or monetary resources to improve particularly the economic conditions of African Americans. Duncan (1999) also noted the ability of powerful whites to inhibit an agenda in the Delta.

Two examples in this work caused me to really consider how effective black political empowerment has been in the Mississippi Delta. First, Mayor Jones discussed at great length the “chosen few”. He recognizes that white, elite landowners still have the power in his county and city to stop an agenda. He notes, “It really boils down to a control factor in that, ‘no I do not agree with that and so I am not going to support it.’ And, If it is that way then the whole purpose of the idea will diminish because of the chosen few” (p. 94). Thus, even when reaching the mayor’s position it does not mean the change they desire will happen. Of course, one could argue that is true in any community where there are always those that will object. In the case of the Delta it is often times successive generations of individuals who have held power informally and are likely to continue its exercise.

Further, though blacks have gained positions within the leadership structure, Mayor Banks recollection of how African Americans were elected in his town is telling. Though only one case, it reflects a power structure that has long been documented in the Delta. Mayor Banks talked about how he put blacks in power in his city. He discussed that he did not like the initial suggestions from the black community of who they would like to see serve them and eventually the black community just told him to choose who he wanted. Within this town, it is not hard to wonder about how much power the African Americans on the board really have. African Americans are making real strides in being elected in the Mississippi Delta. However, more work on the two factors of black political empowerment (election and access to decision making circles) is needed to truly determine how much power African Americans have access to through their election.

Social Institutions, Leadership and the Mississippi Delta: The Role of Church, Family and Community

The literature on religion states that it has long been an important institution in the rural south. This research confirmed that finding. It was rare that an interview did not discuss spiritual matters. For both blacks and whites, leadership was framed through their understanding of the Bible. For many African Americans the church was their first place for learning leadership skills. Many of their mentors were church deacons, pastors or teachers. Therefore, many of the cultural tools they gathered to frame leadership in later life came from the church. African Americans spoke of campaigning in the church. In fact, when one participant was asked whether an individual could run for office and not be a part of a church, they said it would not be possible. Two female mayors spoke of the importance in their prayer groups in not only in terms of emotional support, but also their involvement in helping them run their campaign. This is a finding similar to

Barnes (2005). As Barnes (2005) notes, African American churches often encourage civic engagement through scriptures. For African Americans churches were politicized institutions: the church encourages civic engagement and social action.

However, for whites the church was not politicized. Not one white participant discussed using the church as a campaigning tool. Sunday school, church attendance and studying the bible were a means of understanding how to live a moral life. Mayor Weaver noted the following about community life as was mediated through his understanding of the Bible.

“We are all somebody no matter what people say. The good book says we are all going to dirt and so how is one piece of dirt better than another? I don’t care how much money you accumulate, you aren’t taking it with you [when you die]. But, if you leave a good name something you have done for your community it will be carried on once you are gone.”

There were several cases where conversations like this happened with white men. The church was described as a place where you learned to be a good person and citizen. This is similar to the research on conservative Protestants in terms of the role of the church for them. Hill (2008) notes the messages received in these churches are “about being the right sort of church person and citizen.”

Participants briefly discussed some ways in which the church acts as a constraint. Mayor Meredith discussed how, even in the church, the white and black community are divided even though they are “praying to the same God” (pg. 89). Mayor Stone noted that his church has worked on racial reconciliation though they have experienced opposition from board members. The participants had cultural tools that were developed through the church in which they viewed and practiced leadership. Whether it was actively engaging in community activism through the church or learning what it mean to

be a good citizen through the bible, the church plays an important role in rural society and, in turn, leadership for these individuals. I also argue it is necessary to better understand whether this important social institution is enabling or constraining individuals in terms of race and gender relations. Woodberry and Smith (1998) note that white conservative Protestants hold more traditional views on gender. We also know that white women lag behind other women in terms of running for elected office. It would be interesting to conduct research to determine the role the church might play in decisions by rural southern women on running for elected office.

Swidler (1986) argues that individuals do not construct action from a clean slate. They use the available resources from their culture such as accumulated skills, habits, styles and worldviews. Therefore, leaders to come leadership positions with life experiences that affect how they practice and view leadership. In short, they have been learning about how to lead and developing a motive for their personal leadership commitment. Within this research, family, community, churches, experiences with racism and gender were discussed in terms of learning about leadership. Women found they had to work harder in order to be considered a leader. Participants noted they now put into use as leaders the values that their parents and mentors taught them. Experience is an important part of the social construction of leadership. Experience provides different structures of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in terms of leadership in the Delta. For example, all individuals in this sample discussed the importance of the church in leadership. Yet, the meaning of that experience was different for whites and blacks. Experiences of racism and inequality were important motivators for African Americans yet whites did not have these experiences of oppression from which to frame their

leadership activities. This is the point—leadership theory should better take into account the importance of experiences and contextual factors that orient people to leadership roles and responsibilities. Sociology can play an important role in such an endeavor. The vast literatures on race, class and gender enabled me to connect the experiences of these participants with the field at large.

Contributions of Traditional Leadership Literature

The review of leadership literature was to provide an overview of where current fields sit within leadership studies, educational leadership and political science. Within leadership studies bureaucratic/management models and the transformational leadership literature is popular. Within political science the two competing models are the power model and political leadership model which focuses on problem defining and solving rather than reducing leadership to individuals power seekers. However, it is the educational leadership literature and previous empowerment literature which most closely fits with how these mayors talked about their process of eventually reaching the stage of running for political office. The educational leadership literature notes the importance of critically thinking about the social structures, the importance of the educative aspect of analyzing current situations and educating others about them and creating social change. Though in the educational leadership work reviewed here Paulo

Freire is not mentioned, it is clear the theories are in the same vein which is not surprising since Freire is so influential in informal education. Also in terms of the educational leadership literature, Foster (1989) argues that leadership is concerned with creating the good life for citizens. This is also similar to what leaders discussed whether in terms of creating social change or serving their community.

The political science power view may be of help in future research on the Mississippi Delta. The work of Brown & Nylander (1998) and political scientists such as Dahl (1961) and Hunter (1963) considered power structures which either enabled or constrained individuals and how the structures have changed over time (in reference to the Brown and Nylander piece). But, Brown and Nylander only focused on two communities of the Delta. From this research on individuals in several counties of the Mississippi Delta, it is clear that the time might be ripe for a power analysis at the regional level. An analysis of this nature would also contribute to the black political empowerment theory in better understanding the strides African Americans have made in gaining access to influence and resources since the Civil Rights Movement.

Contributions and Limitations

This study was exploratory and, as such, there are not many “conclusions” from the work. But, the exploratory nature opened some areas that are ripe for exploration in the Mississippi Delta and in the South in general. First, the literature on rural women in leadership is depressingly scant. Since the Burke and Luloff (1997) article only one contribution was found that focused specifically on rural women who were elected officials and that was Carbert’s (2006) work on Atlantic Canadian women. Though the dissertation study at hand had a small sample of women, the findings followed trends of other researchers and adds another small contribution to our understanding the position of women in rural politics. Much more work is needed in this area. But, most notably the void of white women leaders in the rural South is an area that is very much need of research.

This work also shows that though there has been considerable progress made in terms of race relations in the Mississippi Delta (see Wirt, 1997), it is clear that race still structures relationships in a significant way. In every interview race was discussed in some form. The beginnings made in this dissertation should encourage others to follow up on the work of Wirt, 1997 and Duncan (1999) who conducted studies to understand how the social landscape of the Delta is changing particularly in terms of race, class and gender. Much of the work ongoing at the moment in the Mississippi Delta focuses on issues such as healthcare, educational attainment, etc. While incredibly important work, it is also necessary to measure changes in social attitudes.

I have been involved in the evaluation of leadership development programs in the Mississippi Delta for several years. This dissertation research caused me to think of some opportunities for which programming is missing. First, the programs do not take gender into consideration. I was appalled when realizing this area was left completely out of curricula. It was particularly upsetting after hearing the stories of the women and the difficulties they experience in leadership based on gender. Programs need to find a way to serve as both an educative function in terms of talking about gender as well as a means of support for women leaders.

Next, in terms of leadership development programming, the literature on the black middle class, lower class and ideology was eye opening. I thought back to many sessions where facilitators discussed how to work in changing the mind sets of the followers and residents of their community. Leadership development programs need to consider the potential consequences of such work without also advocating leaders understand the view points of working class residents. It is clear from the literature that the assessment of

needs of working class blacks is different than middle class. Leaders need to make sure they are meeting the needs of both groups in terms of both material needs as well as “ideology.” I know within our programming often times this was left out. The material needs versus the values/attitudes approach to social change were never considered. Finally, this work contributes to arguing that leadership is socially constructed from more than just the immediate context in which they are leading. There are multiple layers in which leaders draw from when leading. This research demonstrated the importance of family, church and community.

This study has limitations. First, the sample size was small even though there was a fifty one percent response rate. Will adding more subjects change the findings? It is likely the findings will not change; only the data collection and analysis will be more sophisticated and narrow than the exploratory study. Only time will tell as it is the full intention of the researcher to continue the work. This work only focuses on one very specific region and therefore is largely ungeneralizable to other contexts. Though I do not consider it a limitation, it must be acknowledged that some might. Finally, only the social structures of race, class and gender were considered. As noted by the section on structure and agency we must be careful not to conclude that all leadership actions and relationships are structured by race, class and gender.

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