A Post-colonial Perspective towards Courageous Leadership Development: Unpacking Privilege in Service Experiences

Nicholas A. Clegorne Ph.D.

Virginia Tech
Abstract

In order to encourage leadership for a more just and humane society, many leadership educators turn to community service as a powerful practice for developing socially just (courageous) leadership among our students. On the other hand, there is also evidence suggesting service learning can generate injustice by further establishing privileged practices among students (e.g. Davis, 2006; Eby, 1998; Howard, 2011). The notion that help and improvement, to the privileged eye, means making the other look more like the privileged is a common narrative in post-colonial literature (e.g. Said, 1979; Spivak & Harasym, 1990). It has become all too commonplace in service learning narratives of students to assume that the site of the service is a broken community. This symposium paper will unpack a curriculum for leadership development wherein notions of who plays the role of server and served are troubled. Such a curriculum challenges students to be courageous in casting aside the traditional heroic narrative of charity in favor of sociocultural discussions and mutual development through dialogue.

Keywords: leadership, leadership development, service learning, post-colonialism
Introduction

Virginia Tech’s aspiration for students and alumni to serve as *courageous leaders* sets the university apart from many other land grant and state institutions. In order to encourage leadership for a more just and humane society, many leadership educators turn to emerging models such as the Social Change Model of leadership development and literature emerging from the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL). This literature suggests that community service and community-based (service) learning are some of the most powerful practices for developing socially just (courageous) leadership among our students.

One the other hand, there is also evidence suggesting that service learning can generate social *injustice* by further establishing privileged practices among students (e.g. Davis, 2006; Eby, 1998; Howard, 2011). Such articles warn of the interactive effects of students from privileged backgrounds or in positions of authority in particular. Even the meta-data for the MSL suggest that community service fails as a high impact practice in developing leadership self-efficacy among African American, Native American, and Middle-Eastern American students (some of the most historically and recently marginalized individuals in the nation) (Dugan, Komada, Correia, & Associates, 2012). Such findings suggest there may be more to service learning as a leadership development tool than many leadership educators acknowledge.

Our current postindustrial paradigm is marked by the fact that more resources in our society are exchanged for services rather than products. Working within the postindustrial frame, it is easy to see how we might develop the sense that *service* has a self-referential inherent value. We often assume service is always positive, useful, and, most importantly, desirable to the party that the provider determines to be in need. In other words, there is a powerful assumption of charity within service ideology. Recently, this notion of charity as an element of applied critical engagement has been troubled in service learning and social justice oriented experiences (Eby, 1998; Howard, 2011). Here I submit that service learning is neither apolitical nor benign and call leadership educators to take great care when creating leadership development experiences and programs.
Many transdisciplinary programs in colleges and universities utilize service learning within their curricula. The idea behind such experiences is to have students observe communities or individuals who are labeled with monikers like “troubled”, “in need”, or “at risk”, in a more authentic manner while also serving the public good. Leadership education programs often connect said experiences to models of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) or social change (Astin & Astin, 1996). As discussed before, it is often assumed that service is inherently benign, beneficial, and even heroic. We have seen these narratives play out in our students after the conclusion of several co-curricular service experiences. Specifically, we note that many students who speak favorably of the experience tend to situate themselves as either heroes, martyrs, or both. Further, many seem to need to be told that they have saved someone or sacrificed selflessly in order to have some sort of altruistic itch scratched.

This symposium paper will unpack a curriculum for leadership development wherein notions of who plays the role of server and served are troubled. Such a curriculum challenges students to be courageous in casting aside the traditional heroic narrative of charity. This is, in part, responsive to the recognition that students, on one hand, see themselves as providers of much needed aid and, on the other hand, expect certain “services” in return (e.g. gratitude, praise, etc.) My own local observations of such phenomena are far from unique. Critique regarding the negative consequences of such programs has ranged from unpacking unintended harm (e.g. Eby, 1998) to exposing sophisticated, brutal colonization tactics (Illich, 1968).

This paper is in no way an indictment of service learning for leadership development. Rather it is intended to serve as a point of departure for making leadership development more socially just. A more socially just alternative for the courageous leader, then, is to authentically focus on the gifts of both communities, cast off the privilege associated with his or her own community/position, and to ultimately celebrate each community as viable and sustainable on its own. The goal is to create a space and
relationship wherein all are sharing ideas and caring for each other equitably (e.g. Block, 2009). The benefits of these interactions are reciprocal and often the party formerly known as the “service provider” learns or benefits more than the community often regarded as “needy”. Such a shift is imperative in order to move away from the colonizing practices that follow privilege in many leadership development programs.

**Social Change: A Theoretical Frame**

Why do we teach leadership? Leadership educators are challenged to answer this question which is often framed as; “leadership for what?” Virginia Tech’s aspirations for student learning establish a values-driven answer to this question; *leadership that will make the world more humane and just*. The aspirations for student learning are supported by the broader movement within leadership education surrounding social change and leadership development. Models and measurements such as the Social Change Model of Leadership Development and the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership provide evidence that community service is a high impact practice for leadership development frames by social justice (Astin & Astin, 1996; Dugan et al., 2012), but others suggest that many individuals (particularly those from privileged backgrounds) may be developed in harmful ways (Hooks, 1990; Howard, 2011). Leaning into this dissonance by critically engaging the manner by which students leadership capacities or developed by service learning is important because we can better capture the benefits of service learning while reducing the potential harm to all.

The Social Change Model (SCM) of leadership development (Astin & Astin, 1996) establishes a model for clarifying individual, group, and societal values in order to support leadership development towards a more just society. There is further support in the literature for such development as well (i.e. Brown, 2004; Komives & Wagner, 2009; Lassey & Sashkin, 1983). Here I have chosen to focus on the SCM as the point of departure for this discussion because the model serves as the theoretical framework for the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL). The MSL findings, using an impressive data set
(currently $N = 90,444$) have suggested practices which appear to impact capacity for socially just leadership. These findings are helpful for leadership educators as the design curricular and co-curricular programs; however there is evidence that suggests privilege and positionality of learners may have a confounding effect on leadership development (Dugan et al., 2012; Howard, 2011).

Given the competing politics of community service as a high impact practice for leadership development, deeper analysis of the impact of privilege within the curriculum is warranted. My own experiences processing service learning with students in a co-curricular leadership program have helped to frame such analysis in that students often described the people and communities connected to the service site as “less than” or “invalid”. Further, within some narratives there was also evidence that altering or impacting another’s life somehow supported a given student’s leadership development was troubling. Discourses surrounding privileged students from the center impacting “needy” individuals from the margins drip with the trappings of colonization. Such impact has been a part of our nation’s development stemming from our roots as we have stemmed from European colonization and missionary influence. As such, I frame this discussion through post-colonial critique to further examine the pitfall of careless service initiatives.

A Problem: Leadership in the Eye of the Beholder

To be clear, I am not and expert on community service, nor am I versed enough in the service learning literature to offer a valid critique of the entire paradigm itself. I am a leadership educator who, at best, is a novice regarding service learning. I am not necessarily engaging in this work to interrupt the broad service learning trend in the U.S., but rather to illuminate unexamined assumptions of popular service narratives within leadership education for social justice. Throughout this paper; service, community service, and service learning are used synonymously. I have chosen this approach because across leadership literature, distinctions between the terms are nebulous, though I recognize that within some paradigms these terms have clear delineations. Discourse that is germane to this endeavor suggests that participation in community service expands leadership capacity and efficacy measured on subscales of socially just leadership within the MSL (Dugan et al., 2012). At first glance, students who engage in
service learning appear to develop greater capacity for socially just leadership, but a deeper examination underscores some alarming trends with regards to identity, positionality, and leadership capacity development.

Leadership capacity in the MSL is akin the self-efficacy because data is self-reported by students, meaning that they employ their own value-laden perspective when self-reporting leadership capacity. When an experience is reported as impactful, it is because a student mentioned it as such. In other words, if a student believes they are more capable as a leader they often are. This is a notion that has been supported in the literature since the beginnings for leadership studies (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Stogdill & Coons, 1957). Herein lies the concern, because when service is imagined as heroism on the part of the colonizer, leadership capacity may very well be nurtured towards further colonizing behavior. This is of significant importance because critical theorists recognize colonization tactics and antithetical to the more humane and just world espoused by the movement for leadership and social change.

I have suggested that the impact of self-efficacy on leadership capacity is problematic given the political nature of “good” service as a high impact practice for leadership development. Beyond this anecdotal concern, there is some empirical evidence that suggests that the variation between racial groups regarding reported experiences and leadership development is worth considering. For the high impact practice of community service, the MSL findings indicate that participation was only significant for certain groups. Table 1 illustrates the groups which were or were not significantly impacted:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Capacity Significantly Impacted</th>
<th>Leadership Capacity Not Significantly Impacted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>African American/Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Pacific Islander</td>
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Considering the identity politics of this break-down regarding impact of community service on leadership development, a post-colonial lens seems appropriate for critical analysis. The racial identities which
appear to be unaffected significantly by community service experiences also are some of the most historically colonized peoples by western culture. In order to explain the phenomena of colonization post-colonial critique is framed as a lens for analysis below.

Post-colonial Critique: An Analytical lens

Here I turn from discussion of leadership for a moment to discuss a post-colonial analytical lens. Post-colonialism is a field of study which illuminates the human impact a given community’s impact (colonization) of another community. As the name indicates, the field of studies was originally conceived as a response to the damaging and exploitative interaction that European imperialism forces upon indigenous peoples around the world. I will speak more often of the critique as related to Neocolonialism; in which the colonization is framed as a more subtle devaluation of individuals on the margins by those in the privileged center.

For the purposes of this dialogue I largely lean on the works of bell hooks and Adam Howard as well as the critiques of Ivan Illich to highlight several main ideas from post-colonial critique of U.S. service politics. In the next sections I will address the following critiques in connection to service as a high impact practice for Leadership Development. First, the “American Dream” is a pervasive way of life that privileged middle class individuals struggle to suspend when interacting with others. Second, privileged individuals, though often well meaning, view help and service as converting those on the margins to a center which is linked to the “American Dream”. Finally, the perceived success or failure of service operations is often left “in the eye of the beholder” thus leadership efficacy for social justice has great potential for reification of colonizing practices within the personal development of participants. Ultimately, the latter is the primary concern of this paper, but the first two serve to set the scene and explain why we so easily fall into roles as colonizers in higher education.
Adam Howard and Arthur Levine tell us that the university setting is a structure that is designed to reify a privileged American middle class in many ways (Howard & Levine, 2004). Howard and Levine juxtapose the difficulty experienced by students from the margins of society phenomenon against what Howard describes as “today’s prominent belief that there is not much standing in the way of making it to college for disadvantaged students if they work hard enough p. 20.” I consider this to be evidence that the America has ruggedly held on to the egalitarian and meritocratic simulacrum of education’s relationship to full participation in America. In this sense, Higher Education in particular is often referred to as the gatekeeper to the “American Dream”. Howard and Levine’s critique drives at the notion that the pervasive assumption of the righteousness of the American dream is a determining factor in the hegemony of university curricula and co-curricula including service learning.

Post-colonial scholars and global voices explain the manner by which the core assumptions of the privileged center (in this case the ideal of the American Dream) lead to the destruction or co-opting of those on the margins. Speaking of her experience as a marginalized, poor, black woman within higher education, bell hooks explains: “Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them” (Hooks, 1990, p. 206). Globally speaking, this frame was powerfully tied notions of service nearly four decades ago by Ivan Illich at the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on April 20, 1968:

“Next to money and guns, the third largest North American export is the U.S. idealist, who turns up in every theater of the world: the teacher, the volunteer, the missionary, the community organizer, the economic developer, and the vacationing do-gooders. Ideally, these people define their role as service. Actually, they frequently wind up…"seducing" the "underdeveloped" to the benefits of the world of affluence and achievement. Perhaps this is the moment to instead bring home to the people of the U.S. the knowledge that the way of life they have chosen simply is not alive enough to be shared.”
Here, Illich challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of the American dream and highlights the important concern I seek to raise within leadership development curriculum. Theoretically speaking, I would suggest we should welcome leadership development curricula and service projects that work towards a more humane and just world. Practically, however, the manner by which justice and humanity are defined from a center dictated by an illusive American dream become problematic.

In his sarcastic, scathing indictment of colonialism masked as service, Illich demanded that would be “do-gooders” should only come to what they would call “developing countries” to observe and learn so they can return home and benefit their own communities; but never to “help” the other. He went on to suggest that any further action was an invasion or attack on the community that service workers often believed they were improving. This illusion of missionary service seems to fool everyone except the victims; those who are reported to have been served. Ultimately his critique was fair: help and improvement, to the privileged eye, means making the other look more like the privileged and robs the other of their identity. This is a common narrative in post-colonial literature (e.g. Said, 1979; Spivak & Harasym, 1990). The point is beautifully and painfully written by hooks (1990) as she discusses the manners by which the privileged center rewrites the stories of those on the margins. Mimicking the center she shares:

“no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me of your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” (p. 208)

With these words, hooks elucidates the tragedy of pulling the margins to the center, thus erasing marginalized culture. Such interactions focus on the privileged community’s perceived strengths while
fixating on the other’s perceived limitations; from the viewpoint of the privileged, of course. Consider
the manners by which the projects integrated into you own service learning paradigms were created. How
was the need identified? Whose voices contributed to the planning and in what ways? Did the a priori
outcomes express the desires of the site of service or those of your program? Service and philanthropy are
some of the most frequently observed contemporary colonization tactics in post-colonial literature;
however they are also framed as some of the most powerful tools for creating a better world and
developing socially responsible leaders within leadership development literature. This dissonance
provides the perfect opportunity for dialogue and transformation.

What can be done? The Margins as a Transforming Space.

Up to this point I have suggested that service learning is a dangerous paradigm given its measured impact
on student leadership development. I should be clear that I am not suggesting that community service and
service learning be abandoned. On the contrary, in a world where there is so much pain, suffering, and
injustice, our contributions as global citizens are imperative. Rather, I suggest that most service learning
to this juncture has been a half measure. We are told by hooks that we are most humane when we meet in
the margins and operate in the resistance that can be found there. In every service project I have ever been
involved with location has been every present yet rarely discussed. There was the location of our service
group and then there was the service site and, of course, there were the individuals who called each
location home. Conversations within and across locations were very different. These were conversation
conceived in and steered from the center. Logistics were the “meat and potatoes” of the conversation
when the service group spoke to individuals from the service site. There was certainly a great deal of
discussion of who, what, when, and where regarding the service to be provided, but little discussion of
why or how both communities would be uplifted. How do we change this conversation? How does the
discussion shift away from how can “we” help “them” to how can we all help each other (i.e. Grohs,
2012)?
Transforming and transformational leadership are sometimes linked to leadership for social change (Komives & Wagner, 2009) and the notion servant leadership is also highly connected for obvious reasons. The paradigms are useful in that they all represent leadership as a process by which groups or followers are elevated as individuals and societies (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2003; Greenleaf, 2002). I suggest that these constructs are a good start, but simply do not go far enough. Each of these leadership frameworks is leader-centric and assumes that a leader in the center is responsible for setting visions and creating environments which will alter the group’s status. Further, only transforming leadership (i.e. Burns, 2003) acknowledges that the leader will be changed during the leadership process. In other words, these paradigms, while a good start, still demonstrate a centralized, colonizing approach that can lead to the marginalization of “followers” (the other).

On the contrary, Block (1998) suggests that leadership has become the means by which citizens lose their agency and allow their own voice to be suppressed by reifying stereotypes of power and control. Many leadership programs continue such conversations. Even transdisciplinary programs focused on justice and social change find it difficult to paint visions of the future without a leader-centric focus. This begs the question “What if we remove leaders from leadership when it comes to community service?” Heidegger so simply, yet profoundly explained, “Language speaks us”. Block agrees, suggesting that we should drain the energy out of leadership and focus on citizenship instead. Said differently, the notion of a leader within the realm of service may have become such a toxic ideal that the term itself may be ineffective for all means other than reify oppressive structures. By thinking less about leading, we might better explore a curriculum which draws on leadership, followership, and the interstices between as associative modes for living (i.e. Dewey, 2013), thereby removing the leader from the spotlight and favoring community and citizenship within a complicated space.

This complicated space cannot be the center nor can it be in the space of the oppressed. Discussions of such a location, somewhat paradoxically, return us to the environment the service learning creates. Conversations that are meaningful happen on the margins - that uncomfortable space between oppressor
and oppressed – and dialogue must be co-authored. This is supported in the MSL literature as socio-cultural conversations cut across all racial and identity boundaries as a significant high impact practice (in contrast to community service which seems to ignore traditionally marginalized groups) (Dugan et al., 2012). Returning to bell hooks, we read her call that “a message from that space in the margin is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as the site of resistance” (Hooks, 1990, p. 209)

**Thoughts for Praxis**

What would a service learning orientation that served as a cautionary framework against colonizing behavior look like? The curriculum needs to make participants acutely aware and sensitive to their own positionality in a given community, particularly as it relates to positionality of others. Furthermore, a critical lens that is self-reflective and evaluative of a student’s own thoughts, words, and actions is crucial to cultivating behavior that is authentic, thoughtful and respectful in emergent experiences. Finally, we might clearly combat the invasion that Illich warns us of by framing the entire curriculum in post-colonial critique. Possibilities of such a curriculum are underscored below.

One powerful framework for self-reflection is moral imagination. Werhane (2002) resituated moral imagination from its previous descriptions (Moberg & Seabright, 2000) suggesting that moral imagination includes: awareness of self and positionality, recognition of situation and script in order to identify or avoid injustice, the ability to imagine possibilities external to current contexts, and the ability to evaluate the current and potential contexts from a moral perspective. Using moral imagination as a framework may give learners a process by which to employ critical reflection and post-colonial lenses during immersion dialogues.

Contemporary students have been described as very adept at criticizing other’s roles in their own experience (Twenge, 2006), however they tend to be less developed at critiquing their own privilege and value-laden missteps. Employing a critical theory as a lens in regular reflection is crucial to a more just dialogue within immersion experiences. A critical approach affords us not only a method, but a way of
life that makes the familiar strange and helps to reflectively identify injustices propagated by our actions and the world writ large. Practical reflection through a critical lens can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Journaling, blogging, and vlogging provide opportunities for regular reflection, but a theoretical frame for analysis needs to be included so that self-reflection is held in context. Ongoing immersion experiences may also be tracked and interrogated in this manner. Through transcription and content analysis through a critical lens, students might better come to recognize their own positionality, the narratives in which they have acted, and the injustices which they have propagated. Peer reviewed critique across positionalities might also provide thoughtful insight.

Where a general critical perspective can allow students the latitude to question their own positionality and roles, post-colonial critique can serve as a method to stay the hand of the “do-gooder” whom Illich warns. Post-colonial critique helps one to specifically be on guard for any implicit or explicit expression of a desire to change or alter the other. Linking back to moral imagination, recognition of what it means to colonize a space can help students realize possibilities for new futures in two ways. First, and potentially most difficult, imagining a “service project” wherein one’s help is neither required nor desired is needed to authentically engage the immersion dialogue I have described above. Additionally, it is important for students to be able to take a step further and allow their own home places to be enhanced by the dialogue. If students, staff, and faculty associated with the service-trip-turned-dialogic-immersion are able to regularly practice near unrelenting critical and post-colonial self-awareness, real community care might be a possibility in lieu of invasive “service”.
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