Introducing An Intersectional Lens in Executive Coaching for Black Women Leaders

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Abstract

This paper advocates for the integration of intersectionality theory into executive coaching for Black women leaders, emphasizing the importance of recognizing intersecting systems of race, gender, and class in leadership development. Traditional leadership models often marginalize Black women's experiences, reinforcing systemic inequalities. By adopting an intersectional framework, coaching can address these challenges, promote inclusive leadership practices, and empower Black women to navigate organizational barriers. This approach fosters authentic leadership identities, ensuring diverse voices are heard and valued in leadership roles.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Black women leaders, coaching, executive coaching, leadership development

Background and Methodological Approach

Organizational dynamics, shaped by inequality regimes, mirror societal structures and reinforce racial, gender, and class inequalities, disadvantaging women (Showunmi, 2020). Social divisions, rooted in broader power structures, influence individuals and manifest in organizational, experiential, and representational forms, shaping how these dynamics are theorized (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Biases around social class and race are intensified by sexist, gendered workplace environments (Moorosi et al., 2018). Gender bias and patriarchal norms often disadvantage women, particularly in Africa, limiting their leadership representation (Iwara et al., 2019). Women's challenges in organizations stem from power imbalances that reflect gendered disparities in status and influence (Oldridge, 2019). Societal norms favor men as leaders, while women are perceived as having lower status and authority (Pick, 2017). At the macro level, women face disempowerment in environments marked by exclusion, discrimination, and underrepresentation in management (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). Bias against female leadership styles has further hindered women's leadership development (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021).

Black women face compounded disadvantage, experiencing 'triple oppression' based on gender, race, and class (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Often excluded from mainstream discussions, they must choose between conforming to dominant norms, concealing their identities, or rejecting misrepresentations of their lived realities (Dickens et al., 2019). Research shows Black individuals are frequently seen as less effective leaders than White counterparts due to stereotypes that contradict traditional leadership traits (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Racialized leadership experiences limit opportunities, often making individuals invisible or unwelcome in the workforce and leadership roles (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021). In South Africa, for example, gender and racial hierarchies continue to shape experiences and material outcomes, underscoring

the need for a framework that accounts for multiple leadership development factors (Moorosi, 2014). Despite these challenges, workplace discrimination, racism, and prejudice are often denied, even as they shape the socio-political landscape and erode individual confidence and self-esteem (Stout-Rostron, 2017). Addressing these disparities, particularly for Black women, requires dismantling entrenched gender inequities, power imbalances, oppression, and patriarchal values (Msila, 2021).

Research indicates that career barriers can be mitigated through internal and external support interventions (Doubell & Struwig, 2014). Organizations often use strategies like executive coaching to achieve their objectives (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021). Embedding coaching in leadership programs signals organizational commitment to employees' professional growth (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Pandolf, 2020). In today's fast-changing environment, leaders must seek feedback, learn from daily experiences, and apply those insights to enhance their own and their teams' performance (Witherspoon, 2013). However, Black feminist scholars argue that current coaching practices fail to fully capture and analyze Black women's distinct voices and experiences (Curtis, 2017). As women advance in leadership and research advocates for more egalitarian approaches, Black women leaders remain marginalized within mainstream feminist discourse (Lanier et al., 2022).

Examining Black women's leadership development requires considering race, gender, and leadership theory, as leadership does not exist in a raceless or genderless vacuum (Maher & Hastings, 2023). Coaches must also cultivate socio-historical, geopolitical, and cultural/racial awareness to ensure sensitivity to coaching contexts (Roche & Passmore, 2022). This conceptual article highlights the need for coaches to integrate intersectionality into their practice, as focusing solely on race or gender overlooks the complexity of intersecting identities in leadership development (Moorosi, 2014). To effectively support Black women leaders in corporate settings, coaching must critically assess how it meets their unique needs (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017). Ignoring the interplay of race and gender leads to incomplete understandings of workplace diversity and erases the lived experiences of those with intersecting identities (Sawyer et al., 2013).

This paper suggests that integrating intersectionality theory into executive coaching for Black women executives is crucial for assessing diversity in leadership. Recognizing multiple identities and roles offers deeper insight into how interwoven social positions shape their experiences (Moorosi, 2014). An intersectional lens enables coaches to examine how Black women executives navigate overlapping systems of domination (Schmidt & Mestry, 2014). This approach centers the intersection of oppression in identity formation, moving beyond race as a singular construct to explore its multidimensional interplay with lived experiences (Showunmi, 2020).

To achieve the objectives set above, this paper will:

- Explore the general challenges faced by women in the workplace.

- Explore the unique challenges faced by black women leaders in the workplace.

- Critically analyse the gaps in current coaching frameworks.

- Introduce intersectionality into leadership coaching of black women leaders.

This study adopts a philosophical conceptualization approach, using inductive reflection to synthesize insights from leadership coaching and intersectionality theory. By integrating these fields, it presents a fresh perspective on leadership coaching for Black women leaders.

My research perspective is rooted in critical theories, which recognize subjectivity as shaped by societal, cultural, historical, and contextual forces linked to power and oppression. This study draws on critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought (BFT). Intersectionality originates from Black feminist and critical race theories, reflecting Black women's lived experiences and challenging traditional gender studies frameworks.

CRT, developed through social activism, prioritizes race in critical inquiry. It offers tools to dismantle racialized power structures that disadvantage some while benefiting others. BFT, both a theoretical and methodological approach, centers Black women in maternal health research, enhancing understanding of the societal factors affecting their health and well-being. As a critical social theory, BFT affirms Black women's experiences as legitimate knowledge, analyzing systems of oppression and power. It also provides a framework for Black women to define their identities while validating perspectives historically ignored.

Barriers to Black Women's Leadership: Organizational, Societal, and Intersectional Challenges

Despite significant progress and a growing pool of qualified women, the gender gap in corporate leadership persists, with women underrepresented across industries in both public and private sectors (Repetti & Hoffman, 2018). Gender discrimination remains a major factor in workplace disparities, often resulting in women avoiding management roles, working part-time, or occupying lower-paying positions (Verniers & Vala, 2018). Institutionalized patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity continue to obstruct women's advancement, particularly at senior levels, resulting in a lack of female representation in top corporate roles (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). These disparities endure despite initiatives like diversity education, assessments, and merit-based pay systems (Kroska & Cason, 2019). Moreover, gender diversity policies yield different outcomes depending on an individual's background and privilege, underscoring the need for organizations to address these inequities to attract and retain diverse talent (Thomas et al., 2021).

A key barrier to women's empowerment, as identified by Oldridge (2019), is the glass ceiling effect. The glass ceiling effect, also known as vertical occupational segregation, represents the invisible barriers preventing competent women from reaching senior leadership roles and realizing their full potential (Kogovesek & Kogovesek, 2015). The glass ceiling significantly obstructs women's career advancement, creating an artificial blockade to executive positions (Doubell & Struwig, 2014). While past research has primarily focused on external barriers, internal constraints – such as gender-based challenges, work-life conflicts, and household responsibilities – also contribute (Repetti & Hoffman, 2018). Though self-limiting behaviors like low confidence have been examined, an often subtle yet pervasive invisible wall continues to hinder women's leadership development (Oldridge, 2019).

At the macro level, societal expectations of women as primary caregivers often lead to part-time work or requests for time off, which negatively impacts their career continuity, income, productivity, and participation in management roles (Mousa, 2021). Gender roles influence the

broader interdependence between men and women in family contexts and shape gender discrimination through traditional, complementary gender expectations (Verniers & Vala, 2018). Women balancing work and family responsibilities may opt for flexible roles, part-time or remote work, or even exit the workforce after childbirth, and these choices can limit their ability to build "human capital" and advance to senior positions (Boone et al., 2013).

Other workplace barriers include poor industry awareness, societal and cultural beliefs, outdated roles, discrimination, and male-dominated work cultures (English & Hay, 2014). Internal organizational hurdles also impede women's progress, including recruitment and promotion practices, corporate structures, and organizational policies (Repetti & Hoffman, 2018). Turesky and Warner (2020) argue that the gender composition of management can affect gender diversity, reinforcing behaviors and practices that perpetuate exclusion. While women may be well-represented in some organizations, they are often confined to lower or mid-level managerial roles in departments with predominantly female staff (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2017).

Women's advancement is also hindered by a hostile organizational culture, lack of mentors and role models, exclusion from male networks, and family responsibilities (Doubell & Struwig, 2014). Leadership often focuses on relationships and people, prioritizing future adjustments over duties or information (Stokes & Jolly, 2014). An individual shapes their leadership identity through interactions with role models and networking with leaders (Sims & Carter, 2019). Several factors, such as limited access to exclusive social networks and a lack of mentorship, hinder women's career advancement (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Interpersonal and power dynamics within teams are shaped by the entrenched conservatism of male professionals who dominate knowledge management and leadership activities (Grisoni & Beeby, 2007).

Women's access to senior leadership roles is limited by misconceptions about effective leadership behaviors (Grisoni & Beeby, 2007). Contributing factors include mentorship and promotion practices that favor men, as well as discriminatory policies that require women to meet higher performance standards for raises and promotions (Kroska & Cason, 2019). Research underscores stereotypes suggesting women possess fewer leadership capabilities than men (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Sexism, which seeks to maintain power asymmetry through traditional gender roles, is closely tied to workplace gender discrimination (Verniers & Vala, 2018). Cultural norms surrounding masculine and feminine traits influence perceptions of acceptable behavior (Turesky & Warner, 2020). Broader societal barriers – such as prejudice, discrimination, and organizational obstacles – reflect prevailing attitudes, stereotypes, and biases. These include sexist views held by male leaders, male-dominated workplace cultures, and the stereotype of successful leaders being predominantly masculine (Repetti & Hoffman, 2018).

Dominant discourses frame societal realities as natural outcomes of progress, obscuring the coloniality in everyday life and justifying social injustice by attributing inequality to differences in group capacity or willingness to seize opportunities (Phillips et al., 2015). It is suggested that leaders display specific modal tendencies, and individuals who align with these traits are perceived as typical leaders (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Grisoni and Beeby (2007) argue that mental models, or "schemata," shape individual meanings, influencing group actions and organizational dynamics. Women are often stereotyped as communal workers and caregivers, while men are seen as independent, assertive, agentic, and decisive (Turesky & Warner, 2020). Kroska and Cason (2019) contend that women are viewed as more communal and less agentic

than men, with agency associated with traits like independence, dominance, and competition, and communality linked to deference, helpfulness, and interpersonal sensitivity. In organizational research, gendered concepts of task and process – where men focus on tasks and women on processes in small teams – have long influenced the development of leadership theory (Grisoni & Beeby, 2007).

Research indicates that the perceived mismatch between women's roles and the traditionally masculine leadership prototype negatively affects assessments of their leadership abilities (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory identifies two types of prejudice faced by women in leadership roles. First, women's leadership potential is judged less favorably due to stereotypical female traits, leading to the belief that women lack the expected leadership characteristics. Second, women's leadership behaviors are evaluated more harshly than men's, as they are often criticized for not conforming to societal expectations of femininity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory suggests that individuals are expected to align their behavior with gendered stereotypes, pressuring women to adopt male-oriented traits to be heard (Turesky & Warner, 2020). Female leaders face additional prejudice when leadership roles are seen as incompatible with feminine traits (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Women who display agentic, non-communal traits risk social retaliation or "backlash" for defying gender norms, a pattern that also impacts women in leadership (Wynn & Correll, 2018).

Experiences of Black women leaders in the workplace

Due to their dual subordinate identity as Black and female, Black women leaders experience compounded challenges (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). In their comparison of gender and race, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) found that although Black women perform similarly in leadership positions as their non-Black colleagues and Black men, they receive lower salaries. Black women's invisibility is exacerbated by dominant patriarchal values, as well as class and race (Msila, 2022). Black feminist and Socio-cultural theory highlight how the intersection of race and social class creates a complex barrier that obstructs the leadership development of Black women (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021).

Black women's leadership experiences are shaped by the intersecting factors of race, ethnicity, gender, and social class (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021). The intersection of race and social class impacts a woman's identity from childhood through adulthood, influencing both personal and professional environments (Moorosi et al., 2018). The traditional schematic representation of a leader often excludes both Black individuals and women, placing Black women at a disadvantage compared to other groups with greater schematic overlap. It has been argued that the authority of Black women is still negatively impacted because of the male management stereotype as well as the domination of white males in positions of leadership (Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2012). This leads to the perception that Black women are less typical leaders, as their race and gender intersections do not align with conventional leadership expectations (Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

The invisibility of Black women reflects the distinct narratives surrounding race, gender, and class: racial discourse typically centers on men; gender discourse often focuses on white individuals; and class discourse tends to overlook race (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Politically correct discourses and egalitarian practices, such as essentialist assumptions, color blindness, and

microaggressions, are often adopted by organizational leaders, but these ideologies obscure the ongoing racial discrimination that influences leadership evaluations (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). Essentialist assumptions, which attribute inherent value to traits that distinguish groups, lead to interpreting these distinctions as fixed and unchanging, lacking complexity (Atewologun, 2018). Color blindness – the belief that racial differences are inconsequential – is often experienced by Black individuals as a denial of their identity and lived experiences (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). This ideology, which reflects privileged positions while ignoring racialized realities and inequalities, serves to preserve the interests of dominant groups (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Gearity and Metzger (2017) highlight racial microaggressions as subtle, pervasive messages of exclusion and disempowerment aimed at Black people within the context of White privilege.

Research has also demonstrated that those Black women who are able to successfully navigate the complex trajectory and ascend to leadership positions get to face difficult challenges and this impede their further progress (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021). Black women in leadership positions within mainstream cultures are often overlooked or expected to conform to norms that don't reflect their social identity, facing challenges like limited guidance and resources, and lacking the advantage of White privilege to overcome these obstacles, unlike their White counterparts (Lanier et al., 2022). Black women also get to be excluded from being part of formal networks while also receiving unfair appraisal and negative feedback (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021).

Many Black women leaders experience fatigue as they take on extra work to prove their leadership abilities, often without recognition (S. Davis & Brown, 2017). To protect themselves from marginalization, humiliation, and frustration, Black women often rely on negative coping strategies (Foster, 2021). While Black women's lived experiences equip them to lead diverse groups, they often use survival-based strategies instead of those influenced by mainstream cultural norms and organizational resources (Dickens et al., 2019).

Even in cases where black women advance professionally and become economically self-sufficient, their identity and behavior continue to be defined by some racist and gendered stereotypes (Curtis, 2017). Oppression and privilege can coexist, so that an individual can simultaneously experience both the advantages as well as disadvantages associated with different social class groups (Smooth, 2010). Due to their power and authority, Black women leaders are privileged individuals, but they also get to experience marginalization because, irrespective of their power, they frequently are subject to the trappings of marginalization within their organizations (Moorosi et al., 2018).

South Africa serves as a key example due to the specific challenges Black women leaders face within its socio-political context. However, the arguments and recommendations presented are applicable to similar contexts where Black women encounter intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization in leadership roles. Black women in South Africa have faced decades of oppression and marginalization (Msila, 2021), with their invisibility in leadership attributed to the "masculinity of power" (Pakeng, 2015). Prolonged suppression and internalized inferiority have hindered their individuality and empowerment (Motsoaledi & Cilliers, 2012). Black women are further marginalized by Africanness assertions in modern politics, which valorize patriarchal traditions (Phakeng, 2015). Leadership contexts in South Africa are shaped

by socialized biases such as "West is best," "White is right," and "Think manager, think male" (Booysen, 1999, p 15).

Advancing women to senior positions in South Africa remains a significant challenge, with Black women particularly disadvantaged by apartheid-era political discrimination (Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2012). Leadership representation remains skewed across demographic groups (Booysen, 1999), as Black executives face a legacy of workplace exclusion and inferior education (Motsoaledi & Cilliers, 2012). Patriarchy and apartheid have relegated Black women to the lowest societal status, compounding their struggles (Canham, 2013).

Executive Coaching in Leadership Development: Do current coaching Frameworks Adequately Address Gender and Systemic Challenges?

Coaching has become a key tool in leadership development, helping leaders navigate complex situations lacking clear solutions (Grant et al., 2010). Coaches act as thought partners or "critical friends," fostering adult learning by offering structured guidance, expertise, and reflective support (Bocala & Holman, 2021). Executive coaching aims to modify leadership behavior over time through collaborative, one-on-one interactions that provide encouragement, feedback, and opportunities for continuous learning (Finn et al., 2007). Leaders often face isolation as they rise in rank, receiving less reliable feedback and navigating conflicting personal agendas, making coaching essential for creating a reflective space to address challenges and solutions (Stokes & Jolly, 2014). Executive coaching empowers leaders to explore perspectives and strategies, using powerful questions and observations to draw out insights and recognize coachees as experts in their own lives (Horvath et al., 2024). Additionally, coaches support leaders in managing identity conflicts by facilitating perspective-taking and challenging assumptions to aid sensemaking and enhance self-awareness (Yip et al., 2020).

Research shows that coaching enhances women's legitimacy in senior leadership roles by empowering them to be seen as leaders, developing their leadership identity and confidence (Oldridge, 2019). However, conventional coaching models are inadequate if they fail to account for diversity (Law, 2021). It is important to critically assess professional norms, especially the neutrality emphasized in traditional coaching models (Einzig, 2017). Maher & Hastings's (2023) study examined executive coaching as a tool for promoting gender diversity in leadership, noting the coaching profession's neutrality on social issues. Leadership theory, often based on White, male Western experiences in hierarchical organizations, presents leadership as gender-neutral, and yet the intersection of gender and leadership influence both micro-level leadership expectations and macro-level biased organizational processes (Maher & Hastings, 2023). This current paper challenges the predominance of Anglo-American male perspectives in leadership theories, calling for an intersectional lens that considers race and gender in leadership development (Sims & Carter, 2019).

Current coaching frameworks lack awareness of socio-historical, geopolitical, and cultural contexts which are crucial for fostering sensitivity to the environments in which coaching occurs (Roche & Passmore, 2022). A lack of diversity awareness in the developmental coaching process affects succession planning, a key factor in executive-level promotion (Maltbia & Power, 2005). Coaches must engage with the socio-historical context of dominant coaching practices and their links to alternative, culturally diverse approaches (Western, 2012) and critically examine

professional norms, including the neutrality emphasized in traditional coaching frameworks (Einzig, 2017).

Some coaching models assume individuals can self-actualize and access resources for development, yet this overlooks the systemic and structural barriers in society and workplaces, often internalized by those experiencing oppression (Roche & Passmore, 2022). Despite pervasive inequalities and the enduring impacts of European imperialism and colonialism, coaching interventions frequently focus on the mindset and efficacy beliefs of oppressed groups as remedies for health and well-being under oppressive conditions (Phillips et al., 2015). However, Maher & Hastings's (2023) study identified three key themes that should be considered in coaching: it's about more than just gender, prioritizing humanity over frameworks, and recognizing the complexity of success. Systemic inequality in organizations is evident in the prioritization of masculine traits over feminine ones, showing how gender and organizational context shape leadership styles and expectations (Maher & Hastings, 2023).

Popular coaching philosophies often emphasize reflexivity as an individualized process of reflecting on beliefs and behaviors, but without critically assessing the historical context shaping them (Mbangula, 2024). Coaches should go beyond individual self-awareness to cultivate a critically reflective systemic awareness that acknowledges power dynamics within their environments (Roche, 2022), fostering a socially conscious and reflective coaching practice. To address intersectional complexities, coaches must incorporate cross-cultural frameworks that address race and gender (Law, 2021). It is vital for coaches to thoughtfully engage with race and ethnicity within organizational contexts, considering how power, privilege, and cultural norms shape leadership experiences (Stout-Rostron, 2017).

Intersectional approach in executive coaching of black women leaders

Intersectionality theory has its roots in the Black feminist movement of the 1970s (Breslin et al., 2017). The theory addresses gaps in feminist and anti-racist discourses, particularly regarding Black women's experiences and their struggles for empowerment (Crenshaw, 1991; Moorosi et al., 2018). Crenshaw (1988), drawing from Critical Race Theory and Black feminism, coined "intersectionality" to highlight how U.S. antidiscrimination laws failed to address racism and sexism affecting Black women.

Intersectionality identifies marginalized individuals through interconnected systems of privilege, power, and oppression (Tillapaugh et al., 2017). Researchers use it to analyze identity axes such as race, gender, and class, focusing on uneven power dynamics and intersecting oppressions (Roland, 2018). Unlike other theories, intersectionality emphasizes the simultaneous production and institutionalization of inequality (Breslin et al., 2017). This approach situates individuals within their lived contexts, highlighting how intersecting factors contribute to macro-level inequalities (Showunmi, 2020; Law, 2021).

Rooted in critical inquiry and praxis, intersectionality provides tools to address social inequality (Roland, 2018). It sheds light on the unique experiences of individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalized categories (Breslin et al., 2017). As an analytical framework, intersectionality uncovers the complex ways in which interlocking systems of power and oppression affect the most marginalized (Law, 2021). It also examines the interaction

between macro-structural inequalities and the everyday practices that reinforce them (Moorosi, 2014). Crenshaw (1991) identifies three types of intersectional analysis – political, structural, and representational – highlighting how oppression interlocks, erases marginalized experiences, and perpetuates stereotypes. Intersectional analysis explores how power systems, both formal and informal, reinforce inequalities based on constructs like race, gender, and class (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014).

Coaching offers significant potential for addressing individual and systemic change (Roche & Passmore, 2022) as it catalyzes deeper transformation by raising awareness, challenging mental models, exploring new approaches, and engaging with diverse perspectives (Horvath et al., 2024). Coaching fosters reflexive learning by helping individuals recognize the frames of reference that shape their perceptions (Mbangula, 2024). Intersectionality in executive coaching is an effective tool for leadership development, empowering women and underrepresented groups to reach their full potential (Horvath et al., 2024). Skinner (2014) found executive coaching particularly valuable for women leaders, helping them develop a personalized leadership style rather than conforming to male norms.

An intersectional lens is essential for evaluating diversity and leadership, as it explains how factors like ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class shape workplace experiences, offering insights into social justice, inequality, and promoting change (Atewologun, 2018). By moving beyond traditional minority group perspectives, intersectionality can disrupt and transform organizational practices and social inequalities (Thomas et al., 2021). Richardson and Loubier (2008) emphasize two reasons for applying intersectionality in leadership studies: to uncover the multiple identities and roles of social actors and their interconnections, and to highlight the complexity of social conditions that cannot be reduced to a single category. Both critical race theory and Black feminism challenge power dynamics across social locations, revealing structural inequities and creating opportunities for action (Crenshaw, 1991).

Leadership practices reveal that power and privilege are fluid and shift dynamically among individuals depending on circumstances (Eyong, 2016). Intersectionality's focus on the interplay of power, disadvantage, and privilege at both individual and systemic levels provides a nuanced understanding beyond group-based categorizations (Atewologun, 2018). An intersectional approach to coaching views coaching as a social process, and this enables transformative change by encouraging Black women leaders to critically reflect on their actions, align organizational goals with social perspectives, and deepen their understanding of their role within the organization (Mbangula, 2024). Intersectionality underscores the interplay of individual and socio-structural positions, connecting micro-level identities with macro-level sociopolitical contexts (Atewologun, 2018). Leadership, informed by critical race and feminist perspectives, addresses intersecting oppressions and sociopolitical consciousness (Garcia & Byrne-Jiménez, 2016). At the macro level, elements like language, culture, history, and religion form core identities that shape leadership development (Moorosi, 2014).

Through using an intersectional lens in coaching, Black women leaders can experience transformation through critical engagement and reflection on their social and organizational contexts (Schmidt & Mestry, 2014), particularly focusing on their identities. Black women's identities, integral to their authentic selves, are often marginalized in mainstream leadership narratives, resulting in divergence from dominant neoliberal leadership models (Nkomo et al.,

2019). Leader identity, encompassing race, context, and profession, serves as a foundation for cognition, behavior, emotions, and motivation in leadership development (Seyama-Mokhaneli & Belang, 2024). Leadership styles and identities emerge from the interaction of social and psychological factors at both surface and deeper levels (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Addressing self-doubt is crucial, as self-perceptions – both conscious and unconscious – shape self-worth and influence whether individuals see themselves as victims or agents, often reflecting deeper issues beyond professional identity (Stokes & Jolly, 2014). Coaching has been shown to build confidence and support recognition as a leader (Oldridge, 2019). Coaching with an intersectional lens requires coaches to skillfully implement adaptive solutions, particularly when addressing challenges to core beliefs, shifting values, and competing perspectives (Bocala & Holman, 2021).

Alternative coaching spaces are crucial for Black women to navigate their leadership journey authentically (Seyama-Mokhaneli & Belang, 2024). Ludeman (2009) advocates for diverse approaches to supporting women in leadership roles. Using an intersectional lens in executive coaching offers Black women leaders a space for critical reflection to challenge traditional gendered structures and move beyond the status quo (Thomas et al., 2021). Through perspective-taking, coaches would help Black women leaders challenge internal scripts, reframe their experiences, and expand their leadership potential (Yip et al., 2020). Critical reflection would also reveal power relations and the impact of language and dominant discourse, encouraging informed judgments based on an awareness of societal and organizational imbalances (Mbangula, 2024).

O'Neil et al. (2015) advocate for using a gender lens in executive coaching to enhance women's leadership presence, challenging the limitations of gender-neutral approaches. Skinner (2014) highlights the importance of gender-sensitive coaching, demonstrating that executive coaching had supported senior women in Australia by fostering professional identity development, addressing psychological needs, and enhancing motivation.

Coaching interventions that employ an intersectionality lens are highly context-sensitive, shaped by the unique environments, motivations, characteristics, and attitudes of stakeholders that influence outcomes (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). Factors such as expectations, culture, and client support significantly impact coaching results (Pandolf, 2020). Passmore's (2007) coaching model underscores the importance of understanding the environmental and cultural context in which the coachee operates, with the coach helping the coachee grasp how systemic factors influence their behavior and interactions. Skinner's (2014) qualitative study on women's leadership coaching highlights the value of a gender-sensitive approach to address gender dynamics in leadership, emphasizing the coach's role in fostering authentic leadership within male-dominated norms.

Organizations are not racially neutral; race has always been present, even when unacknowledged (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). Dominant (White) norms often pathologize cultural values, prioritizing these norms over others, and perpetuate gender microaggressions, such as treating women as second-class citizens, ignoring their contributions, assuming their inferiority to men, and enforcing traditional gender roles (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). By identifying systemic influences, coaches support coachee's in navigating cultural norms that shape and constrain coachee's behavior (Passmore, 2007). Incorporating a cross-cultural

coaching model and addressing intersectional issues of gender and race are critical to navigating this complexity effectively (Law, 2021).

Coaching with an intersectionality focus integrates technical and adaptive strategies to challenge belief systems, biases, and behaviors, emphasizing the complexity and necessity of addressing systemic inequities (Bocala & Holman, 2021). Coaches must evaluate cultural dimensions of power, privilege, and rank while addressing workplace dynamics of race and ethnicity (Stout-Rostron, 2017). Power dynamics play a central role in coaching and leadership, shaping relationships and outcomes, with the potential to be used constructively or destructively (Mbangula, 2024). Effective coaching involves strategies to navigate challenging conversations, including acknowledging discomfort and encouraging reflection on identity, power, and privilege (Bocala & Holman, 2021).

Potential limitations to adopting an intersectional lens in leadership coaching

Adopting intersectional lens in coaching may present several challenges. First, as professions globalize and influence developing economies, little is known about how inequalities intersect or how culture mediates these intersections within specific socio-cultural contexts (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012). Social constructionism argues that meaning-making and interpretation are shaped by historical and cultural contexts, with social and psychological realities constructed through interaction, and therefore an intersectional lens must emphasize that knowledge is context-dependent and reflects political and economic power dynamics (Atewologun, 2018). Therefore, women's experiences are complex and content specific. For example, research by Ruiz-Castro and Holvino (2016) in a Mexican context demonstrated that promotion and career satisfaction are not solely influenced by gender but are largely shaped by factors such as appearance, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, education from private universities, and strong relationships with partners, favoring light-skinned, affluent-looking, English-speaking individuals of both genders.

Second, for intersectionality to address broad social phenomena effectively, it must balance capturing individuals' lived experiences within specific intersecting identities while avoiding overcomplicating by endlessly categorizing and prioritizing social groups (Atewologun, 2018). Scholars have identified various organizational factors that shape gender differences in leadership styles (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). While empirical studies on intersectionality in organizations illuminate the construction and intersections of identities in social and work contexts, they often overlook the critical interplay between individual identities and broader societal and institutional structures, risking marginalization of intersectionality theory's transformative social justice agenda (Ruiz-Castro & Holvino, 2016). Incorporating identities is essential for individuals to remain authentic to their core selves (Sims & Carter, 2019). Social identities are context-dependent, with intersectionality framing questions rather than providing definitive answers (Bauer et al., 2021). Social identity categories are intertwined with power structures that define them and can only be fully understood within the historical contexts that shape their meanings (Handl et al., 2022).

Third, there is the tendency to treat women as a homogeneous group, and intersectionality provides a tool to challenge essentialisms and myths about women's experiences (Handl et al., 2022). Black women's experiences are shaped not only by race and gender but also by factors

such as age, culture, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and language. Scholars must avoid oversimplifying the oppression of marginalized groups by labeling them as merely vulnerable, as this erases their agency and resistance while ignoring their complex and often contradictory roles and positions (Handl et al., 2022). Ruiz-Castro and Holvino (2016)'s study revealed a dynamic landscape of inequality where gender intersects with class, racio-ethnicity, and culture, creating unique patterns of privilege and disadvantage that shape employees' career satisfaction, development, and advancement opportunities based on their social positions. To fully capture intersectionality's complexity, analyses must extend beyond classism and heterosexism – originally emphasized in intersectional frameworks – to include often-overlooked systems of oppression such as ableism, cisgenderism, colorism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, and nationalism, all of which significantly influence black women's leadership outcomes (Aguayo-Romero, 2021).

Fourth, intersectionality scholarship has faced criticism for focusing predominantly on marginalization while often neglecting the visibility of privilege. Holding multiple marginalized social identities does not inherently lead to oppression in all situations (Aguayo-Romero, 2021). Individuals can simultaneously benefit from and be disadvantaged by the system, enabling a more nuanced and equitable understanding of experiences and relationships (Handl et al., 2022). Merely documenting inequalities with finer intersectional details may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes of inherent group differences rather than highlighting actionable solutions (Bauer et al., 2021). Intersectionality in coaching analysis should consider clusters of power and privilege, as focusing solely on oppression and marginalization risks overlooking these dynamics (Atewologun, 2018).

Conclusion

This analysis underscores the critical importance of integrating an intersectional lens into the leadership development and executive coaching of Black women. Traditional leadership theories, which have historically centered on the experiences of Anglo-American men, often overlook the unique challenges faced by Black women leaders due to the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class. By adopting an intersectional framework, coaches can deepen their understanding of how multiple identities influence leadership experiences and outcomes. This approach is crucial in addressing the "theoretical erasure" of Black women's voices in leadership, while also ensuring that leadership development models and executive coaching interventions are inclusive and tailored to the needs of diverse leaders.

Coaches must be mindful of how power dynamics, systemic barriers, and organizational cultures shape the leadership journeys of black women. By incorporating cross-cultural frameworks and understanding the relational aspects of race, gender, and class, coaching can foster leadership identities that are authentic and resilient. Ultimately, the integration of intersectionality into leadership development and coaching promotes a more equitable and inclusive approach to leadership in organizations. It not only validates the experiences of Black women leaders but also empowers them to overcome barriers and leverage their unique strengths in leadership roles. This holistic approach ensures that leadership development is not a one-size-fits-all process but one that reflects the complexities of identity and the diversity of experiences in today's corporate and societal landscapes.

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