Leadership, Symbolic Power, and a Process of Cultural Resistance

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Abstract

The phenomenon of leadership is influenced by culture (Peterson, Brannen, & Smith, 1994). However, while culture influences leadership, the dynamics and power of leadership also shape and determine cultural practices (Guthey & Jackson, 2011), and are central in articulating frameworks with which to make sense of reality (Drath & Palus, 1994). At a global level, the current postcolonial world has become the prison of a monologue: The monologue of a dominant culture and worldview. This dominant culture has been imposed through a process of 'Eurocentric leadership' that started in the sixteenth century with Modernity and its darker side, colonialism (Mignolo, 2011).

With this process that situated Western culture at the top of a social hierarchy and the rest of cultures in subordinated positions, the hegemonic culture became a system of domination, social exclusion and control. However, in the last decades have emerged different social movement organizations (SMOs) that challenge this system of oppression, its imaginaries, and social structures, from their own ethnic-identity perspective (Jiménez- Luque, 2012). Viewing culture as a field for struggle to balance asymmetries of power between different worldviews and epistemologies, these SMOs have decided to initiate processes of 'Critical intercultural leadership' to confront hegemonic narratives, cultural assumptions, and social structures, with the aim of building a new intercultural society.

Marginalized and excluded in American society are Native people, in general, and urban Natives, in particular, who for many are invisible although they represent nearly 67 percent of the total Native American population. As a result of this situation of invisibilization, urban Natives belonging to different tribes in the city of Spokane, WA, decided to create The NATIVE Project, an organization focused on gaining political representation and cultural recognition in the Spokane area while providing basic health services to the community. This Native American owned small business led by women serves comprehensive and health care to the greater Spokane community with an approach of sacred hospitality, an intentionally created practice where compassion meets the needs of patients, staff, and community with a holistic perspective that integrates healing of the body, mind and spirit.

The study that I am presenting is a mini-ethnographic case study that includes observations, artifacts collection and interviews, and was conducted within The NATIVE Project. From perspectives of critical theory and intercultural studies, adapting a relational-centered approach that overcomes dichotomies between individual/social, agency/structure and national/international, I examine how The NATIVE Project understands culture as a field for struggle developing frameworks and structures to shape an organizational culture that raises critical consciousness among its members while unfolding a process of emancipatory ethnogenesis.

Exploring the phenomenon of a critical intercultural leadership process (which has not been discussed in leadership literature) that emerges in ethnic SMOs to organize cultural resistance and emancipation offers new insights regarding a more inclusive and diverse leadership that goes beyond the Euro-American canon, and contributes to a better understanding of how the power of leadership influences and shapes organizational culture. Additionally, with this research I shed light on leadership processes of social transformation, and design a developmental model of culture change for organizations that can be reproduced in other contexts.

The four findings of my research are: (1) Making visible the invisible: The sanctuary; (2) We struggle, therefore I am: The platform; (3) United by our differences: The intercultural society; and (4) Emancipatory doxa/Pluri-doxa and transformation: The lines in the sand. The first finding of this mini-ethnographic case study is the necessity of 'Making visible the invisible.' Within a context of a Postcolonial world, The NATIVE Project makes visible the invisible denouncing a situation of social injustice while debunking myths and imaginaries of the dominant culture that portrays Native people as primitive or inferior. Moreover, with the foundation of the organization, there is created a space for safety and a 'sanctuary' for critical reflection for Native people in the Spokane area; The second finding suggests that 'We struggle, therefore I am.' The NATIVE Project provides a 'platform' for action and it is at this platform where critical consciousness can rise to the highest stages through the struggle. Moreover, the platform and the struggle function as a way of balancing asymmetries of power based on the monopoly of the hegemonic culture to control cultural assumptions that value negatively the difference, because through individual empowerment and collective action contribute to decolonize

the minds of both, the oppressed and the oppressors, and 'educate' hegemonic institutions to be transformed; The third finding presents the topic of 'United by our differences.' The NATIVE Project develops a framework of 'social order' and a class consciousness within the organization that bonds through differences valuing diversity, reducing asymmetries of power, struggling for a common purpose, and enhancing a sense of belonging that ends up configuring an 'intercultural society' among employees and patients. A focus on an 'Emancipatory doxa/Pluri-doxa and transformation' is the fourth finding. The critical intercultural leadership process within the Sanctuary, the Platform, and the Intercultural Organization is crystalized with a strong core of cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs regarding the emancipatory and decolonial project that act as lines in the sand and give stability to the culture of The NATIVE Project. This organizational culture is characterized by its resilience to be flexible and adjust to external and internal challenges, and the ability to understanding change and transformation, which results in the design of fluid and flexible organizational/social structures.

I conclude that subordinated social groups seeking recognition and political representation to balance asymmetries of power within postcolonial societies need to prioritize a struggle for the categories that make possible the order of the world and for transforming the categories of perception of that world. Through a lens of Postcolonial studies and Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and violence, my work opens a new direction for the field of leadership studies bringing alternative forms of power, hegemony/counter hegemony and domination/emancipation to the discussion.