

Leadership development, gender and race: Intersectional insights from South Africa

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Abstract

This research explores the existence of differential group-level experiences in a South African retail group's leadership development programme (LDP). Primary data were collected with semistructured intersectional focus groups. Findings were triangulated with secondary data from organizational document analysis. Emerging themes were identified with Thematic and Axial coding. Gender- and race identity shape how content, development needs, peer interactions, and support are experienced within the LDP. Additionally, certain findings also contradict existing knowledge of LDPs, such as the prevalence of mistrust between participants in a mixed-group programme. Findings indicate a need for further research to explore the differential effects of intersectional identities on the experience of LDPs. Findings challenge psychologically and behaviourally focused conceptions of leadership development by demonstrating how multiple identities interdependently influence the experience of an LDP. Concurrently, the study challenges existing knowledge of group dynamics within mixed-group development programmes by highlighting essentialist assumptions about gender and race in the context of leadership development. An analysis of the qualitative data also produced the counterintuitive finding that intersecting bases of privilege might actually result in negative outcomes within a learning context. Finally, the study also contributes to the body of knowledge of intersectionality by demonstrating its utility in leadership development research.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

A growing body of leadership development literature proposes that participant perceptions and experiences need to influence the design of an leadership development programme (LDP) (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2019; Debebe & Reinert, 2014; Jinabhai, 2005; Madsen & Andrade, 2018; Neely, 2009; Rosch et al., 2017; Wakahiu & Keller, 2011), particularly those experiences at the intersection of multiple identities (Atewologun, 2014; Bowleg, 2008, 2013; Parent et al., 2013; Shields, 2008). In a review of extant leadership theory, Day et al. (2014) found that compared with leadership, leadership *development* has a relatively short history of scholarly research. Furthermore, the pervading focus of this research lies within psychological and behavioural approaches to studying leadership development. Leader-centric approaches to studying leadership development overlook macro-social structures and processes such as the community networks Black women build during their journeys to becoming leaders (Rosser-Mims, 2010; Shung-King et al., 2018). Indeed, although limited, empirical evidence suggests that both gender- and race identity

have an influence on the leadership development experience (Carter, 2020; Dugan et al., 2012; Ely et al., 2011; Gedro et al., 2020). Additionally, the growing body of research on identity and leadership development also suggests a greater engagement with multiple- and intersecting identities (Moorosi et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Selzer et al., 2017). This knowledge gap has a profound impact on how we study and practice leadership development as differences in experience will arguably result in differences in outcomes between groups.

The South African private sector offers a suitable context for identity research given the salience of gender- and race identity as a result of the country's socio-political history (Lewis, 2016). This qualitative study was conducted within an LDP of a South African retail group because some immediately apparent differences in outcomes at group level were observed. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics about the population of LDP participants from which respondents were sampled for this study. The observed group differences in the proportion of enrolments, termination rates, and duration in the program serve as the backdrop against which programme participants' lived experiences were explored.

Table 1. Differential LDP outcomes across four intersectional groups

Strata	Black women		White women		Black men		White men		Total	
Number of enrolments^a	137	38.59% ^b	26	7.32% ^b	137	38.59% ^b	55	15.49% ^b	355	100%
Terminations^c	21	15.32% ^d	16	61.53% ^d	26	18.97% ^d	32	58.18% ^d	95	26.76%
Average duration (months)^a	15.62		14.70		13.99		12.54		14.21	

Abbreviation: LDP, leadership development programme.

^aAll these figures exclude trainee managers who are currently still active in the program.

^bExpressed as a percentage of total number of enrolments.

^cTerminations exclude terminations due to death.

^dExpressed as a percentage of stratum enrolments.

The growing body of literature on identity and leadership development, the social context as well as statistical trends within the sample organization's LDP prompted an exploration into how different groups experience an LDP. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. Are there differences in how different race and gender groups perceive and experience the content of the LDP?
2. Are there differences in how different race and gender groups feel the programme addresses their developmental needs?
3. Are there differences in how different race and gender groups experience peer interactions during the LDP?
4. Are there differences in how different race and gender groups experience developmental support within the LDP?

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Leadership development can be defined as the systematic process of equipping individuals with the necessary skills to facilitate the creation of meaning within complex organizational settings (Day, 2011; Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2014; Kleinhuber & Hermann, 2020; Morrill, 2007; Raelin, 2012; Yukl, 2012). Leadership development as a field of study, however, remains relatively undertheorized—particularly from identity—and intersectional perspectives (Day et al., 2014; Ibarra et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2020). A preoccupation with psychological and behavioural approaches in the extant leadership development theory (Day et al., 2014), along with enduring heroic narratives of leadership pose a barrier to conceptualizing women and people of colour as suitable for leadership roles (Roberts et al., 2020). Resultantly, much of the existing literature adopts approaches that present women and people of colour as somehow deficient, which further reinforces and perpetuates marginalization (Bierema, 2017; Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Jones, 2020; Ospina & Su, 2009). This article argues that the relative absence of identity-based perspectives of leadership development is highly problematic as it presents leadership development as a race- and gender-neutral experience (Bierema, 2017; Billing, 2011; Holvino, 2010; Jack & Westwood, 2009; Jones, 2020).

The influence of gender and race on the leadership development experience seems unavoidable when considering that gender and race are key dimensions in the construction of social identity (Jenkins, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and that leadership development involves a process of constructing a leader identity (Day et al., 2014; Day & Harrison, 2007; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Miscenko et al., 2017). The symbolic social categories of race and gender colour how one sees oneself relative to others (Allen, 2010; Bourdieu, 2003) and influence how one assigns meaning to social experiences (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Beech, 2008; Weber, 2010). As a result of this process of assigning meaning to experiences and to maintain the boundaries of social categories, individuals act within the scope of their identities and seek conditions under which this expression of identity is possible. Given the central nature of gender and race in identity construction, it stands to reason that these elements of identity should also be acknowledged when studying leadership development.

A significant body of research shows that women follow distinctly different journeys to leadership positions than men (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Powell & Butterfield, 2015; Simpson & Kumra, 2016). These journeys specifically pertain to the challenges of discrimination, stereotyping and structural barriers (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Carton & Rosette, 2011; Castilla, 2008; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Similarly, a growing body of research argues that people of colour do not experience leadership situations in the same way as White people (James & Busia, 1993; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005; Littrell & Valentin, 2005; Moorosi, 2021; Nkomo, 2011; Ohlott, 2002; Parker, 2005; Spiller et al., 2021). More specifically, people of colour experience challenges within leadership development contexts regarding visible role models, cultural differences, stereotyping, discrimination, heavy penalties for mistakes, and resistance to authority (Ellis et al., 2006; Livingston et al., 2012; McCarty Kilian et al., 2005; Rosette et al., 2016).

Addressing the lack of nuance in mainstream feminist scholarship, 'intersectionality', was developed to better understand Black women's experiences (McCall, 2005). The concept of intersectionality positions race and gender as interlocking social identity categories that are not experienced separately but interdependently, as a manifestation of interlocking relations of social dominance and power (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Crenshaw, 2012; Gouws, 2017). Furthermore, this study also draws on the concept of 'intersectional identity salience', which contends that certain situations prompt individuals to categorize themselves along identity-oriented criteria; which results in men and women from different racial groups experiencing different versions of masculinity and femininity, and in turn reinforce competition and assumptions of mutual exclusion between identity groups (Atewologun, 2014). More specifically this study explores organizational LDPs as acute sites of intersectionality in that gender- and race identity both separately and interdependently influence experience (Browne & Misra, 2003; Morvan & Smith, 2020). This is done by applying the concept of intercategory complexity, which uses intersectional identities as the analytical starting point to explain the marginalization of certain groups (McCall, 2005). Here, the study acknowledges the inherently problematic nature of social categorization (Abrahamsen, 2003) and uses an intersectional analysis to demonstrate the inadequacies of these categories in the context of leadership development in South Africa.

Intersecting identities shape how individuals construct a sense of self and can either motivate individuals to take on leadership roles or to avoid them (Avolio, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gedro et al., 2020; Madsen & Andrade, 2018). In particular, the leadership development literature suggests that both contextual and individual influences related to identity underpin this motivation to take on- or avoid leadership roles. Contextually, it is said that concerns over the learning environment and the meaning of one's identity within that environment could either encourage or discourage individuals from selecting to engage with an LDP. Specific contextual issues include concerns over self-preservation, a lack of trust and stereotypical expectations (Chatman, 2010; Ely et al., 2011; Locander & Luechauer, 2005; Ohlott, 2002). Structural inequalities and their impact on diversified mentoring relationships add additional complexity to the leadership development context (Aminian, 2018; Early, 2017; Ragins et al., 2000, 2015). Furthermore, the assumption that learning occurs homogeneously across groups also poses a challenge when considering that gender- and race identity has a profound impact on how adults learn (Bush, 2005; Dugan, 2011; Kelan, 2012; Ng et al., 2009; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Within the South African context, the notion of essentialised racial differences was central to the Apartheid ethos. In this context, research that considers race thus requires analyses that are robust in its interrogation of power, privilege and difference (Reygan & Steyn, 2017). Similarly, labour policy under the Apartheid regime hinged on the 'male breadwinner model', restricting women's economic participation, producing a legacy of exclusion still visible in organizations today (Groenmeyer, 2011). The South African Employment Equity Act, among others, has been introduced to address these legacies and ensure equal opportunity in the workplace (Employment Equity Act, 1998; Employment Equity Amendment Act, 2013). However, it has been argued that these pieces of legislation have been unsuccessful in affecting sufficient change due to an inadequate engagement with the complexities of inequality in the South African workplace (Warnat, 2012).

In explorations of lived experiences, we often exclude social processes that are difficult to articulate and demonstrate how it impacts racialised and gendered identities (Moolman, 2013). Yet, in exposing and challenging these social processes, we are able to interrogate the negative outcomes in education, employment and income that result from these social processes (Moodley & Graham, 2015). This context shapes the racialisation and gendering that create and reinforce particular social locations in South African society and, by extension, in South African workplaces (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016).

Given the picture painted by the theory on gender, race and leadership development, a significant underrepresentation of women and people of colour in leadership within the South African private sector is expected (B-BBEE Commission, 2020; Bosch, 2021; Deloitte, 2016; Grant Thornton, 2017). Currently, nearly half of the South African economically active population are women, yet only 24.9% of top management positions are filled by women. Furthermore, a mere 9% of South Africa's economically active population is White, while 64.7% of top management positions in the private sector are filled by White incumbents (Commission for Employment Equity, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2020). It is apparent from these statistics that, in the context of organizational leadership, White men enjoy a considerable level of both White- and male privilege, in that men and White people maintain a seemingly elevated status within a gender- and race-based system of advantage wherein men and White people determine norms for success (Andersen & Moynihan, 2016; Banks, 2012; Lund, 2010; Roberts et al., 2020).

Given the gendered and racialised nature of social interaction, using gender and race as an intersectional analytical lens offers an opportunity to deconstruct assumptions about leadership development as a skills development process (Day, 2011; Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2014; Kleinhuber & Hermann, 2020; Morrill, 2007; Raelin, 2012; Yukl, 2012). Specifically, the study exposes leadership development as a highly gendered and racialised process (Bierema, 2017; Billing, 2011; Holvino, 2010; Jack & Westwood, 2009; Jones, 2020), and represents a consequence of occupying a particular position within structures of social dominance and power (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Crenshaw, 2012; Gouws, 2017). This study thus explores this positionality through an application of intercategory complexity (McCall, 2005) to reported occurrences of discrimination, stereotyping, heavy penalties for mistakes, and resistance to authority (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Carton & Rosette, 2011; Castilla, 2008; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2006; Livingston et al., 2012; McCarty Kilian et al., 2005; Rosette et al., 2016). Such an application of the theory is expected to yield insights that explain the marginalization of certain groups within a particular social context, which is necessary for the expansion and maturation of leadership development as a field of study.

METHODS

This study used intersectionality as a theoretical framework and analytical tool to take into account the heterogeneity of experience at the intersection of race and gender within the context of leadership development. Adopting an intersectional approach to studying the experiences of an LDP allows for the exploration of how interlocking social power relations produce and perpetuate institutional discrimination (Acker, 2009; Crenshaw, 2012). More specifically, differences in experiences within an LDP were used to uncover the complexities

of inequality in South African workplaces that contribute to negative outcomes in education, employment and income for certain groups (Moodley & Graham, 2015; Moolman, 2013; Warnat, 2012).

Methods were selected to produce exploratory data on group differences in the experiences of an LDP. Additionally, given the historical context and the continuing salience of race and gender in South African society, a research method which promotes trust during self-discourse was used (Lewis, 2016). Focus groups are particularly useful for studying group-level experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014) because it allows for participant interaction and the interpretation of responses which are richer than if the responses were collected individually (Greenbaum, 1998).

Data were collected by means of focus group discussions with four different race and gender groups. An open-ended discussion guide was developed to interrogate the focus groups in a sensible and practical, yet flexible manner. To generate rich data that builds on existing knowledge, the discussion guide was developed through careful consideration of existing research (Bryman, 2004a). Responses were recorded via digital voice recorder and written notes of participant interactions were kept.

The researcher, a White man within the same age range as the participant sample, acknowledges that his positionality carries with it certain biases. More specifically, the risk of the researcher's background of privilege informing their worldview and his subsequent engagement with the research participants and data is acknowledged and actively addressed throughout the entire research project. Lines of questioning, analytical choices, and inferences were continuously scrutinized for bias to ensure that the researcher's position of power does not obscure diverse and competing positions concerning the researcher and research participants' respective social identities (Kulendrarajah, 2018). This was achieved through the guiding principles of intersectionality (McCall, 2005) and by relying on methodological techniques such as triangulation (Bryman, 2004b).

Secondary data

To ensure completeness and to confirm findings, data triangulation was carried out (Bryman, 2004b) by means of an examination of secondary data from an organizational document analysis. To increase the transparency and trustworthiness of the study, a random sample of voluntarily and premature exits from the programme was drawn from the Human Resources Information System (HRIS) and their 'exit documentation' was extracted from personnel files. Terminations as a result of misconduct, death or disability were excluded from this sample. The sample was drawn for a period of 4 years pre-dating the primary data collection.

For inclusion in the study, two levels of approval were obtained for secondary data. At the time of this study, the researcher was working as a Learning and Development Consultant with the company and therefore had access to said data. First, approval from the Senior HR Manager, as custodian of the data, was obtained to extract secondary data from the HRIS. Second, the authors of the sampled secondary data were contacted telephonically, and informed consent was obtained individually via email communication.

Referring to this secondary data, the term 'exit documentation' is used throughout this paper. 'Exit documentation' includes standard exit interviews, resignation letters and management reports. It should also be noted here that prematurely exiting from the programme also implies leaving the organization as employment with the organization was contingent on the successful completion of the programme.

Dominant themes from primary data were triangulated with data sourced from exit documentation to test for thematic convergence within findings. This process of triangulation significantly enhanced the credibility of findings, as the point at which findings converge is considered to represent a credible reality (Bryman, 2004b; Shih, 1998).

Sampling

Respondents were sampled from a pool of LDP participants within a large retail group in South Africa. The retail group designed a standardized LDP for the structured development of leadership talent. The programme involves twelve months of blended learning comprised of formal workshops, on-the-job training, e-learning, coaching and formal assessments.

The official racial classification used by the South African government to conduct the national census was used during sampling. South Africa classifies race into four categories, namely 'Black', 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'White' (Baldwin-Ragaven et al., 1999; Statistics South Africa, 2020). This study recognizes that simplistic racial categorization is inherently problematic (Abrahamsen, 2003). However, for the purpose of exploring the seemingly persistent statistical underrepresentation of persons within some of these categories, these categories were used.

Based on the organization's demographic composition within the geographical region where the study was conducted, Coloured and Indian people represent a statistical minority and thus, for practical reasons, were not sampled for this study. For each group, Black women, White women, Black men, and White men were selected from the organization's HRIS records using stratified random sampling and limiting the selection criteria to major cities surrounding the site where the focus groups were hosted. To provide sufficient opportunity for each group to be equally represented, only 12 candidates per stratum were invited to participate, as 12 was the maximum number of programme candidates from the White women stratum that met the selection criteria. A total sample of 37 respondents was willing to participate in the study, as shown in Table 2. One focus group session was facilitated for each of the four groups and lasted approximately 2 h each. Focus groups were facilitated by the researcher himself. As a White man within the same age range as the sampled participants, he explained that the research is intended to give voice to their lived experiences and acknowledged that as a White man he does not presume to know what their unique lived experiences felt like. Establishing trust and rapport with participants were facilitated by the fact that the researcher had an established working relationship with participants and a Learning and Development Consultant with the company.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents

Participants' duration in the 12-month programme	Black women	White women	Black men	White men	Total
0–3 months	1	1	2	1	5
3–6 months	1	0	3	3	7
6–9 months	0	0	4	3	7
9–12 months	3	2	2	2	9
>12 months	4	3	0	2	9
Total	9	6	11	11	37

Analysis

Rich qualitative data from focus groups were analysed using coding software and by following a content analysis approach (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2015), within an intersectionality framework. Applying the principle of intercategory complexity, occurrences of intersectional identity salience were identified as a means of explaining diverging experiences of the LDP (Atewologun, 2014; McCall, 2005). In addition to the analysis of primary data, a secondary analysis was performed by triangulating emerging themes from the primary data with data patterns in exit documentation. Illustrative responses are presented in the findings section as quote sets. Quote sets are responses that either share meaning or illustrate differences between groups. Quote sets are tabulated according to the four intersectional groups and labelled from A to I. Lastly, illustrative excerpts from exit documentation are presented in the section on triangulation.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented according to dominant axial codes (i) Expectations of the programme, (ii) Perceptions of developmental needs and (iii) Inter-personal interactions during the programme. Finally, findings from secondary data are then presented and triangulated with primary data.

Expectations of the programme

Similarities between the two female groups were apparent in participants' expectations of support from senior management, as well as in expectations regarding the format of training activities. The White women expressed an expectation from coaches to provide support and guidance with the learning process. In contrast, the Black women's responses indicate more of an expectation of support in developing a leader identity, rather than support with learning activities.

The Black women appear to face challenges to the development of their leader identities, not expressed as acutely among the other three groups. As illustrated in Table 3, the Black women experience nuanced and culturally-loaded interactions with management and staff which they perceive to be hampering their development. Although the White women, as illustrated in Table 4, also express dissatisfaction with the level of support received during the programme, they do not seem to face challenges as complex as expressed by the Black

women. This finding supports the existing literature on Black women's leadership development.

Table 3. Quote set A

Group	Quote
Black women	If I ask for info, she must answer me now. I know that they are busy. I can help her achieve her task whatever she is doing. But now they say they are too busy...
Black women	The staff reaction towards us is a bit strenuous. In a way that we are young, we are very young, we get people who are way older that say your mom. Then when you go to that person and and you say, please can you do 1, 2, 3 for me and you say you need that done before 12 o'clock, it's seen as disrespect. Then when a departmental manager comes to you and ask if you implemented 1, 2, 3, the you say yes, but it's not done.

Table 4. Quote set B

Group	Quote
White women	And I think exactly what she [other participant] said, like we trained in the departments ourselves which is fine we know how to bake a bread, mould the dough, but there was never a specific time when you worked with the specific manager of that department to show me what management skills are supposed to go with that.
White women	I just thought that a coach would be more actively involved than what there was.
White women	...I'm not being trained. If I don't go and ask, what is this, what are we doing about this - I have to pull everything [reports] myself. People are suppose to train me.

Mention of an expectation for the development of 'soft' management- or leadership skills among the two male groups was minor. This might suggest that the men perceived these expectations to have been met. Alternatively, this might suggest an internalization of social messages regarding leadership (Junker & van Dick, 2014; Roberts et al., 2020)—resulting in male respondents perceiving such development as unnecessary.

The two female groups expressed an expectation to learn and develop while at the same time assisting their assigned coaches in their day-to-day tasks, while the male groups' responses seemed to be more individualistic and indicative of some level of entitlement to nonreciprocal relationships with their coaches. This gendered difference in expectations is illustrated by responses in Quote Set C. The men's responses thus appear unilateral and hierarchical, while the women's seem more collaborative (Table 5).

Table 5. Quote set C

Group	Quote
Black women	I expected that she is my manager, she is my mentor. If I ask for info, she must answer me now. I know that they are busy. I can help her achieve her task whatever she is doing.
White women	I think what trainees expect from the departmental manager in that department, to step back two steps, and to let them handle the problem, and to assist them where they need assistance. That is the most training you can get.
Black men	I had never realised that when you come into the company that I would be on the floor...I was expecting having your own office, solving problems in the office and being a manager.
White men	I expected like, in the department, there should be a dedicated training manager. So you get your department, then you can sit and have a face to face and then he can take you through the steps.

Results suggest that White men differ significantly from the two female groups in their perception of their own skill level upon entry. The women expressed an expectation for guidance and frequent contact sessions with coaches, the White men expressed a notably high expectation of the quality of coaching and training materials. Quote Set D illustrates this expectation (Table 6).

Table 6. Quote set D

Group	Quote
Black women	I don't want to say I'm slow, but some of the other trainees know things more than I do. They pick up information better than I do, so sometimes I just feel like I don't know. I do get support from the other trainees though...
White women	When I was training, to be straight honest, I learnt more in the store where I was training. This is because they were including me in everything that was happening...
Black men	I think all of the training sessions that I have attended so far has helped me because it shows what is expected of me. It plays an important role for when I go back to the branch. It gives me like a guideline as what I have to do at the branch level.
White men	[Interviewer] How has the content of the programme assisted you with dealing with challenges?—[Respondent] Nothing.
White men	...I think it's because they [store management] are very insecure about themselves, and they don't know how to address people properly.

The high termination rate from the programme of 58.18% among White men, shown in Table 1, might suggest entitlement and disillusionment with the actual programme experience. The high termination rate, along with poor perceptions of superiors and an apparent sense of entitlement among the White men might lend support to an argument that privilege could be detrimental to the career success of young White male leaders. One might argue that learning contexts where different bases of privilege intersect become disabling as opposed to enabling. In contrast, both female groups appear to be aware of their development needs and therefore crave exposure to development activities. Similarly, the Black men seem to actively engage in programme activities and use alternative strategies such as peer networks to address development needs when formal interventions did not satisfy these needs.

Perceptions of developmental needs

In terms of perceived developmental needs, the White men were quite vocal about their development not being properly managed, as evident from some key responses listed in Quote Set D. Additionally, the White men were the only group that did not indicate a need for more time in the programme before formal assessment. In fact, the White men seemed to be of the opinion that the programme's duration was too long. This finding suggests that White men are either more confident about their potential for advancement or held significantly different expectations about how they should be developed. The White men were also the only group who seemed comfortable with seeking assistance higher up in the management hierarchy, while other programme participants seemed to rather seek assistance from peers and managers within their designated branches—some illustrative responses are shown in Quote Set E (Table 7).

Table 7. Quote set E

Group	Quote
Black women	I got most of the info from staff and supervisors. The managers I got some by observing. You can get info from observing people, maybe not knowing that you are observing, but can observe and get info, but mostly, most of the time our branch manager is too busy.
White women	In my training, I've done all of that. With the mentors that I had, if something needed to be done, she doesn't send somebody else, she sends her trainee, because I needed to know how the specific task had to be done.
Black men	...since the end January I could have seen that I am like getting my training better because they have changed me from the store I have started in and they moved me to another store. There are a lot of trainees there so you can like help each other.
White men	Our Area Manager is very strict with the trainees. He wants to know how you are doing, what's your progress and stuff like that.

Furthermore, both White groups expressed a perception that senior management exhibited a higher interest in their development than the coaches in their allocated stores. This finding was quite interesting when compared with the two Black groups who expressed a preference for using peer networks to assist with their development, rather than seeking help from management (Table 8).

Table 8. Quote set F

Group	Quote
Black women	In our store, we as trainees participate and help each other with whatever kind of job or task.
Black men	We quickly help each other. We saw when there is an issue, we saw when there is a problem.

As expected, both female groups indicated a need for developing their assertiveness. However, what stood out from responses among the Black women, was that some societal and organizational structures seemed to either exacerbate this situation or possibly be at the root of it, as illustrated by the responses in Quote Set G. In this regard, statements such as '...a lack of respect for us, thinking we do not see certain things, while we do'. and an

overt experience of expectations that they lack authority were mentioned by the Black women, but not by the White women (Table 9).

Table 9. Quote set G

Group	Quote
Black women	I am too soft. I don't know how to handle a difficult situation.
Black women	I've told line managers ma'am, or sir, there is a problem in your department, how can we go about fixing it. Then they will say 'I care less, do whatever you want'. Then the next day when the branch manager asks about the problem and what did you do about this problem? Then the line manager looks at me and ask 'did you fix it?'. But yesterday they didn't want to hear anything coming out of my mouth when I was trying to show them the problem. So it's a lack of respect for us, thinking we do not see certain things, while we do.
Black women	Sometimes when a customer comes to you and explains a problem then they say they want to talk to a manager, and I say I am the manager and when the white trainee manager walks past, then they will explain to them. Even the staff.
Black women	[Interviewer] Do you feel that there is a perception among some people that black females do not have authority?—[Majority of respondents] Yes.

The themes identified within the women's responses regarding assertiveness resonate with the existing literature on women in leadership in that women are more likely than men to experience resistance to their authority (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Koenig et al., 2011; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Furthermore, the seemingly exacerbated nature of these experiences among Black women is also in line with existing work on the intersection between gender and race in leadership experiences (Livingston et al., 2012; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Shung-King et al., 2018).

Inter-personal interactions during the programme

In addition to the Black women expressing concern over resistance against their authority from members of staff, both the Black female and Black male groups indicated concern over challenges arising from significant age differences between them and staff. This could indicate a level of cultural sensitivity not present in the two White groups, as is evident from the White men's response to resistance from members of staff in Quote Set H (Table 10).

Table 10. Quote set H

Group	Quote
Black women	...sometime when you say something to them, I don't know how they take it. Sometimes they take it as an insult while you didn't mean it as an insult. Maybe you just meant that they can improve on this point and that they can be better, but then they take it as no you are dumb.
Black men	... the language that they are using, that is where the problem comes. Sometimes, maybe the way they approach those old ladies, that is the problem.
Black men	Um, sometimes as a black person, an older black person, and me as a young manager in training when I go and approach the older black person to give an instruction, it's not necessarily that I have to beg her to do something, but in my culture when you speak to an older person, you need to speak politely. Even though it is an instruction. Even if that person does not comply you can take steps, you must just be polite.
White men	It also depends on how you stamp down your authority because you don't really have that big authority. Also, I agree it will depend from different people if how you, um, approach the people or get information. Tell them listen what's your problem?!

In addition to their distinctive responses regarding interactions with store staff, the Black men's perceived harmonious and positive interactions with White and female peers distinguished their responses from the other three groups. Among the other groups, there were numerous mentions of jealousy and unhealthy competition. However, perceived animosity seemed to be among participants of the same race and gender. Some illustrative examples are shown in Quote Set I (Table 11).

Table 11. Quote set I

Group	Quote
Black women	I just feel than men, they can open up to me. I can ask questions and you know we can communicate better, but now with women I don't know we have this thing where we are looking at each other like no, she thinks she is better.
White women	The girls are very jealous, I don't know why.
Black men	Even in our store, we are treated like brothers and sisters.
Black men	My experience with ladies is no problem because as I would say like almost always I was surrounded by trainee ladies, because like I was the only guy in the store of the trainees.
White men	I think it's professional jealousy or something like that.

Interestingly, all but the White women explained that their interactions with peers of a different gender were superior to those interactions with peers of the same gender. Furthermore, despite perceived jealousy from other female programme participants, the White women along with the two Black groups expressed a perception that successful completion of the training programme rests heavily on the quality of interactions with all peers, regardless of gender or race.

Triangulation with secondary data

The tone of the contents within exit documentation sampled for White women was either neutral or negative. The majority of resignation letters were short, factual and professional with reference to their intention to serve out their contractually obligated notice period. In some cases, however, there were White women who submitted resignation letters and exit interviews which were quite hostile and representative of a negative experience. Often these more negative resignation letters were associated with immediate resignations. The quotes presented in Table 12 illustrate the more negative tone of some of the exit documentation sampled for White women.

Table 12. Secondary data for White women

Group	Quote
White women	...I find it very difficult to work with undisciplined staff who does not want to give their cooperation. I have asked management on numerous occasions for help and advice which I did not receive...I did not feel like a part of the branch manager's team...
White women	There will probably be some relief, now that another 'weakling' has resigned. I did actually enjoy my time with the company but the underhandedness of management got me down. It is not nice to hear things about yourself from other members of staff and to read emails where you are being discussed without speaking about it with me. I believe if I was assigned to a different branch I would have been done with my training by now.

References to 'anxiety', 'weakling' and 'if I was assigned to a different branch' suggest a convergence of primary and secondary data on the finding that the White women experienced significant difficulties in developing assertive leadership behaviours and did not experience the level of support they expected to receive during the programme. Mention of disappointment with a lack of support with 'difficult staff' as well as 'not feeling like a part of the team' suggests a convergence on the finding that the White women expected a more collaborative approach to their work relationships. Reference to 'underhanded management' and some other exit interviews mentioning the perception that colleagues were 'speaking behind each other's backs' suggest a convergence on the finding that the White women experienced professional jealousy. There also seemed to be some convergence on the finding that White women experienced a high level of engagement with their development from senior management as many of the exit documentation noted thanks to Area Managers for the development opportunity.

The tone of the contents within exit documentation sampled for White men was rather mixed. There were exit interviews and resignation letters committing to working a full notice period and thanking the company for the opportunity, there were some neutral and to-the-point letters simply stating the facts of the resignation and then there were letters which offered accounts of a rather negative experience during the programme. The quotes presented in Table 13 illustrate the mixed tone of the exit documentation sampled for White men.

Table 13. Secondary data for White men

Group	Quote
White men	I would like to thank Head Office Management for their support and assistance during my time with the company. A special word of thanks to the Divisional General Manager for everything he did for me and for the fantastic training he gave us.
White men	I feel like we are unfairly treated in our branches. I have been refused leave to see the doctor by my Branch Manager and I have heard that when I complained about chest pains at a work function that he [Branch Manager] have said that I was probably just drunk.
White men	Thank you to all the other programme participants with whom I have worked over the past 6 months. Thank you for your support and contributions over this time. I appreciate it. You are a great group of people to have worked with.
White men	I had transport problems which I brought under the attention of the Branch Manager and Area Manager. However, I was refused a transfer twice despite these problems. I think this is unfair treatment.

Key evidence of convergence on the finding that the White men possessed a sense of entitlement not observed in the responses of the other three groups can be seen in the one quote in Table 13 where the participant refers to his demands for a transfer not being met. Other examples of dissatisfaction with demands not being met were also found exclusively for the White men. Furthermore, in reference to skills development, the exit documentation for the White men showed a frequent reference to positive developmental relationships with senior management such as Area Managers—rather than branch-level management—which suggest a convergence on the finding that some White men were able to engage with higher levels of the organization's management hierarchy, relative to the other three groups. This convergence, coupled with virtually no mention of resistance from members of staff also suggests that, in the context of organizational leadership, White men belong to a privileged group, supporting the notion of the White male leadership prototype.

The tone of the contents within exit documentation sampled for Black men was overwhelmingly positive, which distinguished it from the secondary data sampled for the other three groups. The majority of resignations mentioned a commitment to serve out their notice period, thanked the company for the development opportunity and cited personal problems, an intention to undertake full-time studies or no reason for leaving whatsoever. The quotes presented in Table 14 illustrate the more positive tone of the exit documentation sampled for Black men.

Table 14. Secondary data for Black men

Group	Quote
Black men	Please note that I made the decision to resign due to the family problems that I cannot disclose and I would like to ensure management that the decision has got nothing to do with my service with the company. I would like to thank the company for considering me to be part of the group...
Black men	It is with deepest regret that I have to leave with immediate effect such a well spirited team as for the time spent with this company has really made an impact on both my personal and professional relation as every single one of you taught me something.
Black men	...it was a great honour for me to work for this company for such a long time.

Frequent mention of ‘teams’ and the apparent sincerity of thanks to the management and the organization suggest a convergence on the finding that Black men relied on peer networks for support during the programme and that these interpersonal relations were positive and harmonious. Frequent mention of their gratitude for their ‘development as a manager’ lends support to the argument that the developmental need for management and leadership ‘soft skills’ were met, in contrast to the White men whose secondary data on this theme seem to suggest the internalization of the White, male leader prototype.

The tone of the contents within exit documentation sampled for Black women was rather mixed. Not only was there a mix of positive, negative and neutral comments in exit interviews and resignation letters, but comments from individual programme participants seemed to indicate significantly mixed experiences during the programme. Table 15 presents key secondary data for Black women. Another distinguishing characteristic of the exit documentation sampled for the Black women was the number of resignations with immediate effect. Compared with the secondary data sampled for the other three groups, the Black women had by far the most immediate resignations.

Table 15. Secondary data for Black women

Group	Quote
Black women	To my co-workers, thank you for making my journey with the company a pleasant one. To the Assistant Manager, thank you for the encouragement and for being a partner at the same time. To the Branch Manager, my advice to you sir is don't try to be God because there's only one God who decide the destiny of other people you don't get to do that. Wish God grants you more days so you could live to see the success of people you tried to destroy.
Black women	I have enjoyed my stay with you and what I enjoyed most was working with such a tough man like you. Believe it or not, I have learned a lot from you...
Black women	[Interviewer] What were some of the things you liked about your position?—[Respondent] I got on with staff and management and also enjoyed the pressure. [Interviewer] What is your reason for leaving?—[Respondent] I got a better job opportunity and there is no room for growth in this company
Black women	It has been a pleasure for me to work for the company for four and a half years.

The significantly higher occurrence of immediate resignations among Black women, relative to the other three groups and in light of existing literature on gender, race and leadership (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Powell, 2012; Spiller et al., 2021), suggest that the Black women experience either the programme or the organizational environment in which it takes place as rather negative. This inference, however, is contradicted by frequent references to having ‘enjoyed working for the company’ and having ‘a pleasant experience’ within exit documentation. Potentially offering some clarity to these seemingly diverging and complex responses is who these more positive experiences are in reference to in most cases, for Black women, when pleasant working and learning experiences are mentioned they are in references to peers and co-participants in the programme. Additionally, where negative experiences were cited, they were predominantly within the context of hierarchical relationships with management. This suggests a convergence on the finding that Black women had better access to and superior relationships within peer networks as opposed to hierarchical relationships with management. Within this context, one might also argue that perceptions that members of management want to ‘destroy people’ and that the

organization 'has no room for growth' indicate that there is a convergence on the finding that the Black women did not receive the expected support to develop assertive leadership identities. In sum, the secondary data in many respects converged with dominant emerging themes in the primary data. However, in many cases, these convergences added a further level of complexity to the data and future research should be undertaken to explore this complexity.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how different race and gender groups perceive and experience the content of a LDP. The study was motivated by the dearth of research on intersectional differences in the experience of LDPs.

The results of this study suggest race and gender do affect how participants experience the LDP content. An analysis of how participants experienced LDP content suggests that LDPs are acute sites of intersectional identity salience. The manner in which programme content was accessed, the perceived quality of content, perceived barriers to the access of content, as well as the perceptions of the causes of barriers demonstrated varying experiences of masculinity and femininity across Black and White groups. Examples of this pattern are seen in Black women expressing defiance toward managers who appear unwilling to share information pertinent to their development, and White men expressing concern for emotional expression. Dominant themes in the data suggest that these experiences occur as a consequence of enrolment in the LDP and not as part of general daily organizational life.

Additionally, the utility of practical learning settings also seemed to be contingent on factors such as cooperative staff members for the White women and coach support for the Black women, which was not the case for either of the male groups. This supports existing theory which asserts that women follow different journeys from men toward becoming leaders (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Ospina & Su, 2009; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Shung-King et al., 2018) and that people of colour do not experience leadership situations in the same way as White people (James & Busia, 1993; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005; Littrell & Valentin, 2005; Moorosi, 2021; Nkomo, 2011; Ohlott, 2002; Parker, 2005; Spiller et al., 2021). It also highlights the value of using intersectional identities as an analytical tool for examining the marginalization of certain groups (McCall, 2005). In this instance, both women groups experienced difficulty with the practical learning component of the programme, but for diverging reasons. Evidence of this divergence is seen in the White women adopting a more communal approach to address their challenge, while the Black women adopted a more hierarchical approach.

Furthermore, the two female groups' concern for the context within which practical learning takes place, juxtaposed with the White men's harsh critique of the programme content, also suggests that social structures affect the experience of LDP content and thus the problematic nature of an assumption of homogeneity in learning across groups.

The results of this study suggest race and gender do affect how participants experience developmental needs being met by the LDP. Results reveal a distinct preoccupation with a perceived need to develop assertiveness among the female participants, which was not the

case for the male participants. This perception among female respondents, coupled with responses citing subordinate resistance from the White women and a lack of support from coaches to develop assertiveness from the Black women, confirms the pervading focus within leadership development on psychological and behavioural traits, which overlooks the influence of larger social structures on the leadership development experience. Specifically, the two women groups' diverging responses regarding the ability to develop assertiveness point toward differences in how Black and White women experience their feminine identities within the context of the LDP (Atewologun, 2014).

The most apparent pattern within responses regarding perceived development needs was the White men's harsh criticism of the programme's ability to address their developmental needs, which suggests unreasonably high expectations of the programme or an over-confidence in their own management abilities. Furthermore, a distinct difference in perceived development needs and how these needs are organized according to organizational hierarchy was found between the male and female groups. The manner in which participants conceptualized and categorized different skills they perceived to need to develop inherently positions women as deficient, in that women perceived their developmental needs to start at an organizational level significantly lower than the developmental needs reported by the two male groups. This presents a significant concern for the transformation of leadership structures in the South African private sector. Distinct differences in how the four groups expressed their development needs, and how they were—or were not—met, serve as evidence of how current equality legislation is inadequate in its engagement with the complexities of inequality in South African workplaces (Warnat, 2012). These patterns in the data are in line with Crenshaw's (2012) argument that antidiscrimination laws generally do not work with multimarginalized individuals, as one can only claim race-based or gender-based (etc.) and thus highlights a severe gap in South Africa's transformation agenda.

This difference in reported developmental needs could be the result of an internalization of social messages regarding the incongruence between management identities and feminine identities (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rosette et al., 2016; Simpson & Kumra, 2016), as a result of inequality in organizational structures (Acker, 2006, 2009), as a result of the manner in which the programme is designed and delivered (Debebe & Reinert, 2014; Kelan, 2012; Ohlott, 2002), or a combination of these factors.

The results of this study suggest race and gender do affect how participants experience peer interactions during the LDP. An analysis of responses regarding peer interactions during the programme offers a challenge to existing literature regarding group heterogeneity. The literature suggests that within a development context, group heterogeneity might give rise to concerns over self-preservation, trust and stereotypical expectations (Chatman, 2010; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Dugan et al., 2012; Madsen & Andrade, 2018; Ohlott, 2002). However, the data revealed that the men interacted better with women and vice versa. Similarly, both White groups indicated positive working relationships with Black peers. Additionally, where problematic peer interactions were reported, it was between peers of the same gender and race—except for the Black men who seemed to engage harmoniously with all peers. This pattern within peer interactions is even more interesting when considered within the context of the finding that all participants, except for the White men,

perceived positive peer relationships to be vital for the successful completion of the programme. This finding is also arguably evidence of interlocking relations of social dominance and power (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Crenshaw, 2012; Gouws, 2017). One could argue here that drawing on both White and male privilege, the White men did not express the perception that positive interaction with peers is vital to the successful completion of the programme because they simply did not experience a need for additional support.

Finally, the integral role of networks in leadership development, and the apparent intersectional identity salience the women and people of colour experience in establishing and maintaining these networks (Atewologun, 2014), demonstrate how a focus on psychological and behavioural traits in leadership development research leaves leadership development theory essentially incomplete. Such individual-focused approaches to leadership development risk the marginalization of certain groups by overlooking the lived experiences of intersectional identities in a social context (McCall, 2005).

The results of this study suggest race and gender do affect how participants experience developmental support within the LDP. The White men emerged as the only group that did not rely on peer networks for developmental support. The White men reported a preference for seeking support from superiors and also reported feeling comfortable with seeking support from senior management. In contrast, the other three groups reported experiencing jealousy and resentment from superiors which were not conducive to supportive relationships. These patterns in group-level differences resonate with the literature on intersectionality which argues that gender- and race both separately and interdependently influence social experiences. The manner in which the White men expressed their comfort in seeking support from management as something they are entitled to while the other three groups expressed caution as to not appear incompetent or deficient in some other way also suggests that LDP development support is a material site of intersectional identity salience (Atewologun, 2014).

Additionally, the White men seemed more concerned with having control over the development process than securing support during the process, supporting the literature which argues that women and people of colour experience leadership development differently. From an intercategorical complexity perspective, contrasting these views of the White men with the other groups who sought alternative avenues of developmental support, such as peers in the case of the two Black groups and coaches in the case of the White women, offers an explanation for why certain groups take longer to complete the LDP (McCall, 2005). It would also appear that in the context of a LDP, Black men are not able to access male privilege in the way that White men are able to.

This significant difference in the experience of developmental support between the White men and the other three groups highlights the potential value of considering contextual influences on the leadership development experience, beyond that of psychological and behavioural factors.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms intersectionality, and more specifically intercategory complexity and intersectional identity salience as invaluable instruments for unpacking nuanced social processes that occur during leadership development. Using intersectionality as a tool to analyse the qualitative data offered an opportunity to critique leadership development theorizing that is focused on individual-level skills and psychological factors. Results from the analysis exposed leadership development as a highly gendered and racialised process within structures of social dominance and power; and support the growing body of literature that positions challenges to leadership development experienced by women and people of colour as a symptom of both social inequalities and leadership development theorizing that is inadequately equipped to address these inequalities. Thus, using intersectional identities as the analytical starting point to explain the marginalization of certain groups, the study was able to demonstrate that both race and gender affect how LDP content is experienced, the developmental needs that emerge and to what extent they are met, how peers in an LDP interact and how developmental support is experienced. Finally, this study also offers evidence of inadequacies in South African public policy to address the complexities of enduring inequalities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is required to probe more deeply into the extent to which universally designed LDPs can meet the needs of diverse groups. It is recommended that researchers consider the heterogeneity that may exist within intersectional groups. Experimental studies that compare participant experiences from mixed group LDPs with experiences within single identity programmes might also yield valuable insights into the marginalization of certain groups. A deeper enquiry into LDPs as sites of intersectional identity salience could also offer insights into how organizations might design their programmes to be more effective. Other issues regarding areas of further research may include larger samples, focus groups with less structure to encourage more open-ended responses, as well as probing further into identified emerging themes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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