ABSTRACT

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LEADERSHIP: AN EXAMINATION OF NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS OF NONVIOLENT SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEADERS

Patrick Kennelly
Marquette University, 2022

Leadership studies scholars consider transformational leadership theory a universal theory that applies in all situations across the globe. It is one of the most taught leadership theories in American higher education. Leadership scholars often cite leaders of nonviolent social movements like Gandhi and Dr. King as transformational leaders. Transformational leadership scholars frequently use press accounts of historic leaders to examine how transformational they were. In this study I use thematic analysis to examine press accounts of the leadership of three nonviolent social movements, the March on Washington, the Civil Defense Drills, and the Journey of Reconciliation. I compared the themes that emerged to the main tenets of transformational leadership theory and discovered notable patterns and absences. When reporting and framing stories about the leadership of nonviolent social movements, journalists focused their storytelling on a select group leaders who were almost always male, heterosexual, educated, and had institutional affiliations. The newspaper portrayals also provided a partial and often inaccurate portrayal of leadership, selectively including and omitting certain details. This selective inclusion and exclusion by the press makes it an unreliable source from which to draw conclusions about the validity of transformational leadership theory. I conclude that the press has engaged in the social construction of an archetypal leader, using selective portrayals that work to maintain the status quo. News stories are therefore not valid or reliable sources of data to test transformational leadership theory as their role is largely to confirm it.