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A Re-Contextualization of Ethical Leadership: Decentering Dominant Characteristics With Compassion in Leadership Preparation Programs

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The Educational Leadership and Administration discipline requires a more expansive theoretical understanding of ethical leadership, contextualizing ethics with the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture. With critical analysis of ideology, the perception of normal order in the social world, and its function within disciplines, is questioned for a deeper understanding of ethical leadership. As a result, an interrogation of the implicit characteristics of dominant culture may prompt future educational leaders to re-evaluate their own personal guiding principles along with the ethical principles that influence their organizational climate. This article aims to critically examine dominant characteristics with the intention to facilitate a more critical understanding of ethical leadership and disrupt existing traditions that work against transformational change. An additional goal of this article is to advance counterculture principles like compassion by accentuating interdependence and intentionality in leadership preparation programs. An emphasis on compassion may positively affect advocacy skills in support of the communities that future leaders will serve, facilitate deeper understandings about empathy and how it influences interpersonal relationships, reduce the likelihood of professional burnout, and positively impact the performance of future leaders in the workplace. Practical suggestions are shared to support counterculture principles like compassion and self-compassion for leadership development.

The Educational Leadership and Administration discipline requires a more expansive theoretical formulation of ethical leadership, contextualizing ethics with the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture (Wright et al., 2018). In the social world, dominant cultural characteristics center on shared understandings of historically included members of society that set the standard by which historically excluded members must function (Brookfield, 2005). Dominant culture also establishes the theoretical perspective within a particular discipline, facilitating an interconnected and interrelated understanding about ethical relationships and how they work within that field (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Characteristics that often appear as normal order are uncritical internalizations of dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1974–1980/2010; Brookfield, 2014; Gramsci, 1929–1936/2010). Through critical analysis of ideology, the perception of normal order, and its function within disciplines, is questioned to facilitate a contextualized understanding of ethics and disrupt existing traditions that work against transformational change (Brookfield, 2014). This article aims to decenter characteristics of

dominant culture with counterculture principles of compassion to advance interdependence and intentionality in leadership preparation programs. An additional goal of this article is to encourage future educational leaders to transform rather than maintain the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture that influence educational institutions like schools, colleges, and universities.

A Re-Contextualization of Ethical Leadership

Ethical theory dates to Socrates (469–399 BC) and what we know from the writings of his student, Plato (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997). Northouse (2004) shares how "the word ethics has its roots in the Greek word ethos, which means customs, conduct, or character" (p. 302). Socrates asserted that self-knowledge is foundational to all other forms of knowledge (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997). Like Socrates, Nel Noddings (2015), a prominent scholar in the field of the philosophy of education, argues that "an education worthy of the name must help students to examine their own lives" (p. 238). Since ethical theory offers a code of conduct that guides leaders in their decision-making process (Kouzes & Posner, 2012), Noddings (2015) recommends discussion about character education, conduct, and care relations begin with an ethic's approach, including modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation in education.

First, Noddings (2015) suggests that ethical relationships must be demonstrated with the concern and goal of caring for others. In addition, the act of caring must be perceived by others as genuine for modeling to be effective. Next, engaging in dialogue about the act of caring is critical to personal development. A potential outcome of dialogue is the facilitation of reflection about personal guiding principles and its influence on daily practice, prompting a re-evaluation of how to establish caring and ethical relationships. In parallel, the practice of caring, and the continuous reflection on that practice, is also essential to the development of ethical relationships with others. Finally, Noddings (2015) highlights the benefits of confirmation— the act of affirming the best version of the self and encouraging the best in others— with elements of trust and continuity present in relationships. In general, ethics has to do with how leaders engage in relationship with the self and others, making ethical relationships a very important topic in leadership preparation programs (LPPs). That is why criticality about ethics are a key factor in leadership development, where future leaders play a large role in facilitating the ethical climate of an organization due to their power of influence—the ability to engage others with mutual goals and reinforce the organization's values (Northouse, 2020).

A critical understanding of ethical leadership facilitates a deeper understanding about the implicit characteristics of dominant culture, prompting future educational leaders to interrogate their own personal guiding principles along with the ethical principles that influence their organizational climate. Sensoy and Di Angelo (2021) argue that a naming/not-naming dynamic exists within organizations, where dominant culture

remains un-named to infer a universal neutrality to dominant groups. For that reason, it is important that future educational leaders engage in explicit discussion about dominant characteristics to name what often goes un-named within institutional culture (Brookfield, 2014). LPPs are invited to ground ethical theories in a critical framework to contextualize ethics with the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture. Without the re-contextualization of ethical leadership, LPPs may continue to lead future educational leaders in the uncritical internalization of dominant characteristics, perpetuating existing traditions and structures that center dominant culture within an organization.

Theorizations about ethics in leadership are often decontextualized from the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture. Some of the more prominent ethical theories in leadership development also lack this type of explicit contextualization. For instance, Heifetz (as cited in Northouse, 2020) argued leadership to involve the use of authority to encourage others to navigate through conflict values in the 1990s. Heifetz perceived this as an ethical issue because it deals with the values of others. In the late 1970s, Burns (as cited in Northouse, 2020) agreed that leadership includes a moral dimension, where leaders engage others in the process of assessing their own values and needs, facilitating a conscious awareness in pursuit of equality and equity in the workplace. In the early 1970s, Greenleaf (as cited in Northouse, 2020) theorized a slightly different approach to ethical leadership, calling it servant leadership. A servant leader is attentive to the needs of others, assumes a social responsibility in service to others, and recognizes others as equal contributors within an organization, emphasizing counterculture characteristics like that of unconditional positive regard. Northouse (2020) notes a common theme among the three perspectives, where each concept includes an interpersonal relationship based on a particular set of personal guiding principles that affect the ethical climate of an organization. However, the three common theorizations of ethics in leadership are limited in that the principles discussed are not explicitly contextualized with dominant culture to question and re-evaluate the myth of neutrality.

More recently, scholars are calling attention to the need for a more expansive view of ethical leadership, situating issues and relationships within the cultural, social, and political contexts it exists within. For example, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advocate for the use of multiple ethical paradigms in leadership development to facilitate awareness of perspectives that leaders often use in their work. In doing so, Shapiro and Stefkovich aim to prompt reflection and critique about traditional values and the potential for unintended outcomes that affect personal growth, interpersonal relationships, and institutional climate. Similarly, this article emphasizes the importance of critiquing traditional narratives in education to uncover the hidden curriculum of domination that is deeply embedded in the ideological and structural premises that influence educational institutions.

Since this article aims to explore a theory of ethical leadership that could be described as critical, a brief explanation of criticality is also warranted. Brookfield (2005) writes, "critical theory [is] grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more *compassionate* [emphasis added]). world" (p. 10). With a critical lens, leaders have an opportunity to interrogate uncritical internalizations of dominant culture that are deeply embedded in the social world. Ideological critique facilitates a conscious awareness to help leaders decenter dominant characteristics that justify and perpetuate economic and political inequity. To do this, critical theory must be situated in a political analysis at a systems level, providing future educational leaders "with knowledge and understandings intended to free them from oppression" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 25). Further, critical analysis must integrate culture and context for a more democratic vision of the future. Brookfield argues that verification of critical theory is only possible once this vision is realized. To illustrate, dominant characteristics like "fear of open conflict," "sense of urgency," and "only one right way" work against the interdependence and intentionality necessary for a more democratic vision of educational institutions (dRworks, 2016, pp. 29–33). These dominant characteristics accentuate conflict avoidance to maintain personal comfort, a false sense of urgency to sustain power imbalances, and one right way to qualify a single approach to leadership (dRworks, 2016). In the next three section, these characteristics are examined further with the intention to facilitate a more critical understanding of ethical leadership, and its implications for ethical relationships in the workplace, to center counterculture principles like compassion by accentuating understandings of interdependence and intentionality in leadership preparation programs.

Fear of Open Conflict

Interpersonal relationships provide opportunities to make sense of institutional culture, facilitating an understanding of shared goals to help move the organization forward. To do this, Yang (2015) identifies interdependence as a key feature among working teams to increase cooperation. However, leaders are often faced with the challenge of facilitating collaboration when conflicting values and perspectives arise. Yang (2015) argues that the way leaders handle conflict affects emotional and cognitive experiences in the workplace. For instance, leaders who engage in dominant or compromising strategies may be perceived by others as adopting neglect or avoidance behaviors, impacting perceptions of fairness and trust in the workplace. Gelfand et al. (2008) describe avoidance behaviors as actions that are both agreeable and passive to manage conflict in the workplace. In addition, Brown (2012) links fear of interpersonal conflict with the desire to control the situation at-hand. In both cases, the underlying assumption is that conflict is dangerous and should be avoided to maintain conflict-free interpersonal relationships (Gelfand et al., 2012). Findings from a study by Gelfand et al. (2012) suggest that conflict avoidance negatively correlates with psychological safety—when employees feel secure enough to engage in

creative thought, experiences, and/or interactions with interpersonal risk at work (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). Fear of conflict can be counterbalanced with an understanding of interdependence, engaging purposely with others, and listening to diverse perspectives. Healthy positive interpersonal relationships can lead to complex thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills to further the goals of an organization (Brown, 2012, 2018). Moving forward, LPPs are invited to consider acts of compassion, engaging future educational leaders with different experiences and diverse perspectives to help them navigate the complexities of their institutional culture with interdependence.

Sense of Urgency

A true sense of urgency provides opportunities to act on critical issues within an organization. Kotter (2008) distinguishes a true sense of urgency from a false sense of urgency, where the former is driven by determination and the latter by feelings of anger and anxiety. Kotter explains how feelings of anger surface from failures of the past while anxiety is triggered by excessive worry about the future of one's livelihood. Kotter states,

> anxiety and anger drive behavior that can be highly energetic—which is why people
>
> mistake false for true urgency. But the energy from anger and anxiety can easily create
>
> activity, not productivity—and sometimes very destructive activity ... [that may lead to]
>
> unproductive flurry of behavior that is a false urgency. (p. 4)

Kotter argues that a false sense of urgency is not sustainable in the workplace because it is founded on anxiety and anger, which can lead to burnout when a natural human limit is met.

Bradt's research (2010) also illustrates how common it is for individuals to engage in activity without intentionality, often reacting to a false sense of urgency. Findings from Bradt's study report 47% of participants think about something other than what they are doing. Similarly, Tolle (2004) relates a false sense of urgency with a false sense of self, where individuals over-identify with their thoughts and emotions because they interpret the world through memory from past experience and anticipation of future experience. In this case, a conditioned sense of self is formed by unconscious thinking. Tolle (2004) counterbalances a false sense of self with greater conscious awareness to disrupt unconscious thought patterns, freeing the conditioned self with focused attention to the present moment. Findings from research conducted by Mahfouz (2017) support a connection between conscious awareness and improved leadership skills, such as self-reflection, self-care, and positive interpersonal relationships. The study also indicates that participants who reported improved leadership skills also stated an

increase in self-awareness, self-management, and self-compassion, which is associated with pro-social behavior that positively affects institutional culture. Moving forward, LPPs are invited to consider acts of self-compassion, engaging future educational leaders with the need for pause and reflection to help them navigate the complexities of their institutional cultures with intentionality.

Only One Right Way

A Forbes article written by Britcher (2018) entitled, "Overcoming the Leadership Perfection Problem," links perfectionism with limitations to learning, authenticity, and transparency in the workplace. Perfectionism is interrelated with a mindset of only one right way, implying that there is no room for improvement to avoid experiences with failure and to control for negative outcomes. Neff (2011) links perfectionism with harsh standards and high expectations of the self, of which are then projected on others. To illustrate, perfectionism is associated with a micromanagement approach, attempting to control outcomes by controlling others. This type of protective leadership tactic may impede on motivation and creativity, leaving team members feeling stifled and leaders feeling over-worked (Britcher, 2018). Findings from a study by Otto et al. (2021) found self-reported perfectionism to negatively impact leadership behavior, where leaders with a higher level of perfectionism reported a lower tendency to forgive others in case of mistakes. The results indicate how perfectionism may hinder the development of positive interpersonal relationships and the facilitation of a safe climate for interpersonal risk at work.

Neff (2011) counterbalances perfectionism with understandings of the shared human experience and intrinsic human value. Findings from a study by Schabram and Heng (2022) suggest that both compassion and self-compassion practice replenish human resources like self-control, self-esteem, and social belonging. Specifically, the researchers argue that compassion disrupts cynicism and self-compassion eases exhaustion, which reduce possibilities of burnout when a natural human limit is met. Moving forward, LPPs are invited to consider both compassion and self-compassion practice, engaging future educational leaders with the openness and psychological flexibility needed to positively contribute toward human sustainability, interdependence, and intentionality in their organizations.

Critical analysis of ethical theories allow future educational leaders to understand ethical relationships at a deeper level. It is important to recognize that ethical leadership does not sit outside of the social, cultural, and political contexts it exists within. If LPPs are to disrupt the uncritical internalization and perpetuation of the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture, then a commitment to re-contextualize ethics in leadership is required. Research in areas of leadership, along with a more critical understanding of ethical theories, are further causes to de-center dominant

characteristics with counterculture principles like compassion, honoring interdependence and intentionality in pursuit of transformational change for a more democratic vision of educational institutions.

De-Centering Dominant Culture with Compassion

Compassion is demonstrated when an ethic of care is directed toward others. The origin of the term stems from the Latin meaning of "to suffer with" (as cited by Brown, 2010, p. 16). This implies that a foundational element of compassion is to bear witness to the lived experience of others. Neff (2011) explains the act of compassion as the recognition of the shared human experience with the acknowledgment of, and desire to alleviate, the suffering experienced by others. Brown (2017) argues that engaging with others in collective joy and collective pain can increase an openness about the world and diversify perspectives about how it works. A study conducted by Winburn et al. (2020) found that educational leaders who report higher levels of compassion are better positioned to advocate for the common good. The researchers collected data from 139 participants asked to complete the Empathy Assessment Index and the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment. Findings from the study showed a significant relationship between levels of empathy and advocacy competencies reported by educational leaders. According to the results, a high level of empathy can be an indicator of effective advocacy skills (Winburn et al., 2020). An emphasis on compassion in leadership preparation programs may positively affect advocacy skills in support of the communities that future leaders will serve.

The word compassion relates to other terms in the literature that emerge from interpersonal relationships, such as empathy and love (Neff, 2011). To further understandings about empathy, a study by Goleman (2017) identified three sub-areas that comprise the concept: cognitive, emotional, and empathetic forms of empathy. Cognitive empathy represents the ability to accurately perceive what others are intending to convey, emphasizing the cognitive information processing necessary to achieve a perceived listening experience. On the other hand, emotional empathy describes the capacity to recognize emotion in others. Finally, the recognition of unspoken needs from those in distress is understood as empathetic empathy.

A study conducted by Solomon (2017) demonstrates how power may interfere with the ability to empathize with others. Research findings show that elevated social power is associated with a reduced emotional response to the suffering of others, such as feelings of distress at another person's distress. Solomon (2017) collected data from 118 participants who were asked to complete the Sense of Power scale, Baseline Emotional Experience scale, and Decoding of the Partners' Distress questionnaire. During the experiment, partners were randomly assigned and asked to think about an event that caused emotional suffering, where one discussed the event while another listened. Findings indicated that participants who reported higher social power experienced less emotion (e.g., distress, compassion) in response to their partners account of suffering. The prioritization of compassion in

leadership preparation programs may facilitate deeper understandings about the empathy of future leaders, or lack thereof, and how it influences interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

An empathetic consideration of others and their basic human rights sets the foundation for genuine human connection. West (1993) argues that the decision to love is a conscious one, where the self is grounded in the humanity of others. In this vein, hooks (1994) calls to mind a practical element of love, where action in support of others can lead to connection and community. A study conducted by Sadri et al. (2011) found empathetic concern was a significant moderator of performance in a cross-cultural context. The researchers gathered data from archival database of multisource ratings from practicing leaders around the world. Data points from 37,095 practicing leaders from 38 countries were evaluated. Findings indicated that higher ratings of empathic concern from employees positively related to higher ratings of leader performance from their supervisor. Findings from this study also indicate that empathy plays an important role in leadership development across an international sample. A focus on compassion in leadership preparation programs may positively impact the performance of future leaders as perceived by team members and supervisors in the workplace.

Compassion is found in relationship, including the intrapersonal relationship within one's mind. For instance, in the literature, self-compassion is defined as including, "proactive behavior to better one's situation" (Neff, 2011, p. 12). Neff (2011) offers three sub-elements of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The act of being kind toward oneself aims to reduce habits of self-critique and self-judgment. While an acceptance of the shared human experience aims to normalize both positive and negative emotions derived from lived experience. Whereas mindfulness aims for equanimity so that individuals avoid over-identifying with their thoughts and emotions, allowing them to respond at a level aligned with the way the situation is perceived. A study conducted by Biron and Veldhoven (2012) discovered that not-for-profit service workers who report higher levels of psychological flexibility also report lower levels of daily emotional exhaustion. The researchers recruited 170 participants to complete a questionnaire and a diary survey over the span of three consecutive workdays. Biron and Veldhoven (2012) suggest that elements of self-compassion may reduce the likelihood of professional burnout. A shift toward openness and psychological flexibility may facilitate acceptance of the range of human emotion rather than suppress or control for them, moving away from self-critique and/or self-judgement toward self-compassion at work.

Research in the areas of compassionate and caring leadership are beginning to document the following potential benefits: (a) plausible increase in advocacy skills, (b) probable improvement to interpersonal relationships, (c) possible boost on performance, and (d) likely reduction in professional burnout (Winburn et al., 2020; Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012; Sadri et

al., 2011; Solomon, 2017). In addition, research findings indicate that compassionate and caring leadership is associated with lower turnover and an increase in collaboration in the workplace (Melwani et al., 2012). Hougaard et al. (2018) surveyed more than 1,000 leaders and found 91% reported compassion as "very important" to leadership development. However, 80% of respondents stated that they did not know how to develop the skill. With these statistics mind, it is important to facilitate dialogue about character, conduct, and care relations with an ethic's approach in education, advancing counterculture principles like compassion in leadership preparation programs. The goal of the next section is to become better acquainted with acts of compassion through practical application of a helping skills module exemplar for LPPs (Krikorian, 2022).

Helping Skills for Leadership Preparation Programs

LPPs may further understandings of interdependence and intentionality through compassionate and caring leadership. For example, a helping-skills module may advance the study and development of helping skills for observation and communication techniques. Coverage includes detailed exposure to Carl Roger's (1960) Person-Centered Core Conditions with an emphasis on understanding theory and acquisition of basic skills. Rogers (1960) emphasized three core conditions to facilitate helping relationships: (a) congruence between those in relationship, (b) unconditional positive regard toward others, and (c) compassion for others. Rogers (1960) emphasized the value of empathetic concern in relationship with others, where trusting interactions invite the psychological safety necessary to engage in interpersonal risk at work. In parallel, psychological safety may encourage greater trust and self-acceptance to engage in creative thought and further develop problem solving skills to navigate complex situations. Rogers and Farson (2015) write,

> one basic responsibility of the [leader] is the development, adjustment, and integration of individual employees. [The leader] tries to develop employee potential, delegate responsibility, and achieve cooperation. To do so, [they] must have, among other abilities, the ability to listen intelligently and carefully to those with whom [they] work. (p. 1)

Rogers and Farson (2015) argue that listening is a crucial way to spur about change in people and organizations, bringing "about changes in their basic values and personal philosophy" (p. 3). In order to motivate people and bring change to organizations specific techniques for empathetic listening need to be taught and learned. The aims of Rogers' Person-Centered Core Conditions (2015) are to facilitate the proper conditions for learning, authenticity, and transparency in pursuit of positive organizational results. In the next five sub-sections, practical suggestions are included as part of a

helping skills module to encourage compassion in leadership development: (a) mixed reality simulation (MRS), (b) a listening journal, (c) storytelling, (d) a Note-to-Self exercise, and (e) a self-care plan.

Mixed Reality Simulation

Future educational leaders can be introduced to basic helping skills with mixed reality simulation (MRS), offering a greater understanding of ethical relationships with the self and others. The simulation-based technology aims to facilitate a safe space in a low-stakes environment for practicing helping skills like compassion practice. It offers an intervention tool for future educational leaders to address difficult situations in the field while engaging the class in ethical discussion and exploration. MRS offers an innovative approach that mimics real-world issues with scenario-based experiences to address ethical issues more holistically (Ireland, 2021). MRS has successfully been used in areas of education where participants report feeling like they interacted in a real-life scenario as opposed to pretending or gaming (Dieker et al., 2017; Straub et al., 2014). In a national study, researchers found that after four 10-minute sessions of MRS learning, participants significantly outperformed colleagues not exposed to the training in targeted behaviors (Mursion, 2020). Spencer et al. (2019) also compared role-play with MRS and found it to be significantly more useful practice tool in educator preparation. To date, research findings continue to support the effectiveness of MRS with educator preparation programs. An explanatory sequential mixed methods study conducted by Ireland (2021) recruited 52 educator preparation programs in the United States and found that respondents frequently reported MRS scenarios as most beneficial to future professionals. LPPs may consider integrating MRS as a practical component of a helping skills module, where future leaders take turns engaging with the technology to practice compassion grounded in Rogers' (1960) Person-Centered Core Conditions.

MRS scenarios may include, but are not limited to, simulations about: getting to know others; restorative justice circles; social, emotional, and cultural competencies; politically charged environments; and stakeholder (learner-caregiver-community members) conflict. Peer feedback can be incorporated by those who observe the MRS experience along with feedback from the instructor, where feedback is qualitative in the form of alternate perspectives and question-posing to further critical reflection about how to incorporate compassion practice in leadership. MRS experiences can be used to emphasize practical elements of compassion, shifting away from dominant characteristics of only one right way and fear of open conflict toward collaboration and conflict resolution that honors interdependence and intentionality in leadership preparation programs.

Listening Journal

In parallel, leadership preparation programs (LPPs) may ask future educational leaders to keep a self-reflective journal of their MRS experiences throughout the module. One purpose for the practice of compassion is to facilitate greater sensitivity to issues involved in listening to others who are different in significant ways (Norkunas, 2011). Southwest Minnesota State University (2023) offers the idea of a listening journal activity. The journal should include brief descriptions of all the listening experiences with MRS. It should also include an analysis of the ability to achieve a perceived listening experience and how individuals can learn to listen more effectively in the future. Finally, the journal should conclude with an honest assessment of listening competencies and articulate goals for how to become a better listener. The self-reflective journal is one way to facilitate pause and reflection about personal listening habits and how to improve them. Norkunas (2011) found that learners who wrote about listening reported a deep impact on content and performance, while also reporting how honesty, openness, and self-revelation eased discomfort in talking about social justice issues. A listening journal may emphasize empathetic understanding that can positively influence professional interactions, shifting away from dominant characteristics toward pause and reflection for intentionality.

Storytelling

Leadership preparation programs (LPPs) may also consider designing the helping skills module with instruction through storytelling, grounding stories about leadership in personal identity, reflexivity, and the cultural-historical self to inform leadership development (Raj, 2022). Palmer et al. (2010) recommend the use of stories during instruction to balance conceptual ideas, offering a more inviting space for brave conversation by relating lived experience with course content. Brave spaces are described in the literature as a place where members of a community share, question, and educate about different perspectives and openly take risks in challenging perspectives (Arao & Clemens, 2013). For example, story circles are one way to use compassion to support dialogue and transformational change in organizations (C. C. Martinez, 2019). Martinez et al. (2020) describes story circles as a group of six-to-ten individuals who form a circle and share stories from personal experience or hypothetical situations around a common theme. In this case, the circle may focus on operationalizing compassionate leadership, where the storytelling builds a deeper more complex understanding about ethical principles that makeup compassionate and caring leadership.

As a result, story circles, "can become practical interventions for building shared power and moving to action after hearing themes from the stories and building relationships between individuals" (C. Martinez et al., 2020, p. 4). This practice can be facilitated in-person or in a remote format as part of the helping skills module. Each circle is assigned a facilitator (e.g., instructor) who reminds participants of the general guidelines, is mindful of time, and makes

space for everyone to share equally. Story circles emphasize new or diverse perspectives, shifting away from dominant characteristics toward openness of our common humanity and interdependence.

Note-to-Self

Neff (2011) explains self-talk as internal dialogue that may be negative or positive depending on how individuals identify with their thoughts and emotions. Sometimes, individuals rely on self-judgement to motivate them to perform, which can lead to a false sense of urgency, anxiety, and professional burnout. With the Note-to-Self exercise, future leaders are prompted to reflect on a challenging MRS experience that they struggled with and are directed to write a note to themselves. In this note, they are asked to take a gentler approach as if they were writing from the perspective of a loved one. Once the task is complete, they are asked to read the note out loud and notice if the gentler tone reflects the way they typically engage in self-talk during challenging times. Neff (2011) argues that the more individuals engage with positive self-talk the more they will re-train their inner voice to assume a kinder tone and reduce self-criticism when experiencing something new or difficult. This exercise may emphasize positive self-talk, shifting away from dominant characteristics toward an empathetic understanding of our innate human value for intentionality.

Self-Care Plan

Planning in advance for self-care is also recommended as part of the helping skills module. A plan for self-care may assist future leaders in reducing professional burnout. Butler (2023) differentiates maintenance self-care from emergency self-care, where the former is what individuals require as part of their daily life and the latter are techniques to use when they are in crisis. There is no one right way to develop a self-care plan. However, Butler (2023) explains how there are commonalities among plans that offer the most benefit to individuals, which is one that attends to all the dimensions of an individual's life, including the mind, body, spirit, emotions, relationships, and work. When developing a plan for self-care it is suggested that individuals first identify their current coping mechanisms to manage stress. Butler (2023) encourages individuals to reflect on lifestyle habits that impact health, well-being, and negative or positive coping mechanisms. Within the self-care plan, add a goal to reduce negative coping mechanisms that may exacerbate stress levels (e.g., isolate from others). Next, reflect on existing self-care strategies for physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, relationship, and workplace self-care. Commonalities across areas may offer a starting point for strategies to include in the plan. As a next step, when identifying specific practices for *maintenance* self-care, it is important to understand that these are strategies that are employed on a regular basis and should reflect actions that can be used even during the most challenging of times (Robertson as cited by Corwin, 2020).

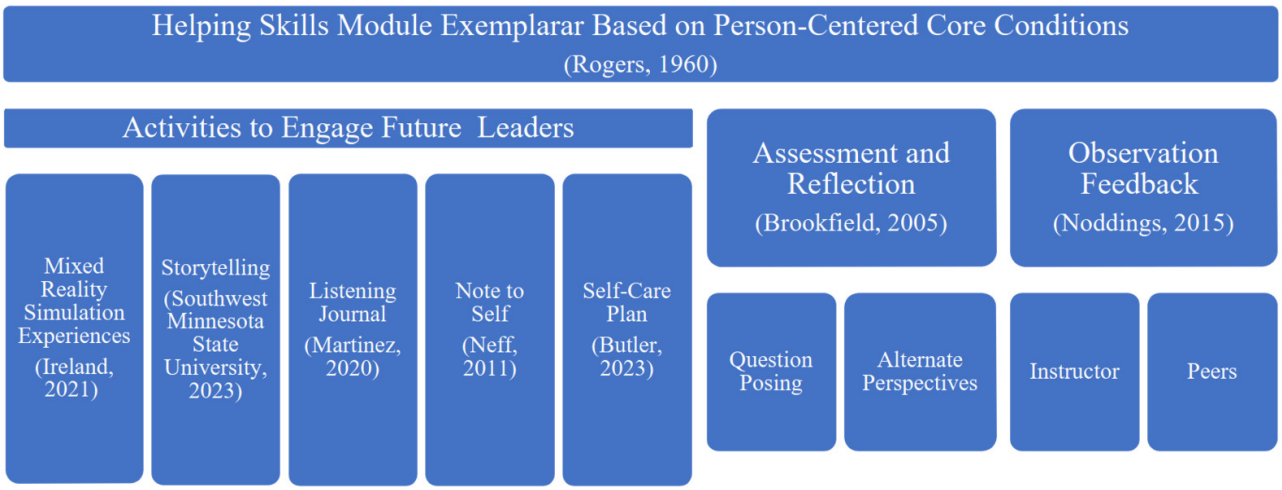

Figure 1. Helping Skills Module Exemplar

On the other hand, when identifying specific practices for *emergency* self-care, Butler (2023) suggests making a list that includes: (a) activities to do when upset that are healthy and positive, (b) people to reach out to if support is needed, (c) positive affirmations to recite during a difficult time, and (d) who and what to avoid in challenging situations. It is important to consider an emergency self-care plan much in the same way that one would think about preparing for other potential crises like natural disasters. To finalize the plan, articulate how and to what extent the plan will be implemented, share the plan with others for accountability purposes, and track the progress of the plan for revisions if needed. A self-care plan may emphasize boundary setting, shifting away from dominant characteristics toward balance and equanimity for greater intentionality.

In LPPs, a helping skills module is one way to facilitate compassion in leadership. In practice, it de-centers dominant characteristics that impede possibilities for justice-oriented practice and policy work. In parallel, it facilitates understandings about interdependence and intentionality to work toward building and sustaining institutional cultures that thrive as communities and individuals. The helping skills module may also be used in other areas of educator preparation to support leadership at every level (e.g., principal, teacher, counselor). For an overview of the helping skills module and accompanying activities please see Figure 1.

Overall, the helping skills module aims to support emotional well-being and the facilitation of institutional cultures of wellness with the practice of compassion in leadership development. A general purpose of compassion practice is to consider opposite viewpoints for understandings about our common humanity (Grace, 2011). When compassion remains a guiding principle for ethical leadership, future leaders are more inclined to acknowledge interdependence, recognizing "that our successes and failures—both individually and collectively—are inherently tied up with others" (Kaufmann, 2017, p.10). Additionally, a general goal of self-

compassion practice is to "actively comforting ourselves" (Neff, 2011, p. 42), which facilitates greater intentionality "to think carefully about the things we are doing" (Kaufmann, 2017, p. 13). When self-compassion remains a guiding principle for ethical leadership, future leaders are likely to pause and reflect in challenging moments to contribute toward human sustainability and reduce chances of professional burnout.

Conclusion

Leadership preparation programs (LPPs) talk about the importance of ethics in leadership but often fail to contextualize implicit dominant characteristics to ethically serve all individuals within an organization. LPPs cannot assume that future educational leaders have the language and understanding around ethical terms because they are immersed in relationships within their daily lives. A critical understanding of ethical theories is needed to facilitate deeper understandings about interactions with others and their implications for ethical relationships in the workplace. Criticality offers future educational leaders the language and understanding to name what often goes un-named within institutional culture, which may disrupt traditions that prioritize the interest of the few above those of the many (Brookfield, 2005). LPPs may decenter characteristics of dominant culture with counterculture principles of compassion to further develop interdependence and intentionality among future educational leaders.

LPPs are invited to contextualize understanding of ethics in leadership to assist in the minimization of potential distress in relationships with the self and others. Critical analysis of ethical theories is crucial to leadership development because engaging in relationship is an ethical process with potential costs and benefits that impact the lived experience of leaders and others, which makes ethics a very important aspect of leadership preparation programs. Future educational leaders play a large role in helping to dismantle the impacts of dominant characteristics within their organization. That is why there is great need to interrogate the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture, uncovering uncritical internalizations that work against transformational change.

This article contributes to ongoing discussions about ethical theories, advocating for a re-contextualization of ethics in LPPs to facilitate the proper conditions for leading transformational change. Counterculture principles like compassion are one way to situate interdependence and intentionality at the center of ethical leadership for a more democratic vision of educational institutions. Moving forward, LPPs are invited to facilitate conversation about ethics in leadership with a critical lens. In turn, this may enrich future educational leaders with a set of understandings that allow them to develop ethical relationships that "democratize production to serve the whole community and ... reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 17). LPPs have an opportunity to encourage future educational leaders to transform in place of maintain

the ideological and structural premises of dominant culture that influence educational institutions, situating ethical leadership within the social, cultural, and political contexts it exists within.

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