

“Hidden Figures” Film Analysis

Posted on December 1, 2025

Team Film and Video Case Reports

This paper sheds light on the achievements and challenges of the [hidden figures](#) of society, building on the “Hidden Figures” movie, which is based on the three pioneering women who contributed to the success of space programs during the Space Race and the Cold War, although their efforts and achievements remained undervalued for decades. The paper also draws on Northouse’s “Leadership Theory and Practice” and Alice Eagly and Linda L. Carli’s article “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership” to represent the complex and varied challenges women encounter throughout their careers and lives, despite their talents and extraordinary abilities.

“Hidden Figures”

Context of the Film

The true story of “Hidden Figures” is set against the backdrop of significant historical events that occurred during the mid-twentieth century in the United States. “Hidden Figures” is set during the Cold War era, also known as the Space Race, particularly focusing on the intense competition between the Soviet Union and the United States to achieve spaceflight supremacy during the 1960s. This period was marked by a series of exploratory and technological milestones, including the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik — the first artificial satellite — and the subsequent push by the United States to send astronauts to the moon and into space. The film also highlights the racial discrimination against the women known as “human computers” who worked at NASA during the 1960s. It underscores both the challenges and the achievements of African-American women in the fields of technology, mathematics, engineering, and science. It also underscores the challenges of African-American women working in a racially segregated unit of NASA known as the West Area Computers, despite their immense talent, contributions, and triumphs in the space programs. “Hidden Figures” brings to light an era that was a time of social upheaval, with professional and personal struggles in the lives of women fighting for equality and justice. These struggles intertwined with the Civil Rights Movement, which worked towards ending discrimination and racial segregation against women who were instrumental in some of NASA’s greatest achievements during the pivotal period of the Cold War and the Space Race in U.S. history (Melfi, 2016).

Significance of the Relationships Between the Key Figures of the Film

The three pioneering African-American women — Mary, Dorothy, and Katherine — whose calculations for NASA were integral to specific space missions had significant relationships with one another as they faced several personal and professional challenges due to racial segregation and gender bias during the 1960s. The relationship between them highlights the importance of support systems, especially in challenging environments, as the “hidden figures” of women at NASA needed encouragement and emotional strength to succeed in their careers. The challenges Mary, Katherine, and Dorothy faced, as portrayed in the film, underscore the idea that behind every triumph and achievement, there is often a support system — a network of people who believe in one’s abilities and subsequently contribute to one’s success. These relationships matter because they serve to humanize the characters, making their challenges and triumphs more relatable to the audience. They also form the backbone of the characters’ determination and resilience to achieve their goals and overcome obstacles.

Leadership Style of the Key Figures in the Film “Hidden Figures”

The film suggests to its audience that every character in the movie has their own distinctive leadership style. NASA’s first Black female engineer, Mary Jackson, was known for her optimistic spirit and enthusiasm. She was also assertive, which helped her advance in her career, and her pioneering leadership skills enabled her to advocate for gender equality in the sciences. Katherine Johnson, a Black woman in a predominantly white, male-dominated American society, had exceptional mathematical abilities that led her to adopt a collaborative leadership style in her workforce while overcoming various barriers. Dorothy Vaughan displays a visionary leadership style characterized by support, encouragement, and fostering a nurturing work environment. She learned FORTRAN to anticipate the impact of electronic computers on computational jobs, ensuring that her colleagues remained employable and relevant in the changing technological landscape.

Furthermore, Al Harrison’s character, based on Robert C. Gilruth, displays an egalitarian leadership style, as he grew to understand and revolt against racial segregation and gender bias within his department. Al Harrison was goal-oriented and focused on his mission regarding the space programs. Mrs. Mitchell reflects the views and attitudes of white women in managerial roles, though her character does not represent any actual historical figure. In the film, Mrs. Mitchell reflects a leadership style shaped by the societal norms of that era. Lastly, John Glenn depicts a leadership style marked by humility, courage, and service as the first U.S. astronaut to orbit Earth. Although his leadership style is not discussed in detail in the film, he was known for valuing his colleagues’ contributions.

Moreover, the film suggests that Al Harrison became aware of the extent of the discrimination within his department only after Katherine's confrontation, because discrimination and bias can become invisible to those who do not experience them directly. It may take a significant event or direct confrontation — such as Katherine Johnson's — to bring discriminatory acts to light, which in the film led Al Harrison to take action to address discrimination in his department. This highlights the importance of advocacy and effective communication in bringing about change. The authors of the article also argue that a more nuanced understanding of the journey, including its expected and unexpected twists and turns, is crucial to achieving leadership quality and equity (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Northouse describes the invisible barrier — also mentioned by Eagly and Carli — through the metaphor of the "glass ceiling," which prevents women from ascending into top leadership positions because they are "disproportionately concentrated in lower-level and lower-authority leadership positions compared to men" (Northouse, 2021).

Transformation in the Storyline of "Hidden Figures"

The movie "Hidden Figures" depicts characters undergoing significant transformations as they confront and overcome the societal and racial prejudices of 1960s American society. The central theme of the film is the significant transformation journey of each character, who faced and overcame sexism and racism within NASA, enabling every key figure to grow both personally and professionally. Dorothy Vaughan learned IBM programming to ensure the team's relevance in the evolving space race. [Katherine Johnson](#) demanded to be present at every male-only meeting, while Mary Jackson asserted her right to challenge the segregated education system in order to become an engineer. However, the film does not solely focus on the characters who transform; it also portrays more static characters who serve as a backdrop against which the protagonists' transformation journeys unfold, particularly in terms of views on [race and gender](#) equality. The characters in the film do not passively accept their limiting situations; several characters support others who represent the status quo of the era, while also engaging with reality, as Al Harrison does when he supports Katherine Johnson after she confronts the discrimination. They identify opportunities for action within the constraints imposed upon them, which ultimately leads to their transformation. Overall, it is the three pioneering female characters who achieve better careers and undergo the most significant change in "Hidden Figures."

The Story of the Hidden Figures in "Hidden Figures"

The movie "Hidden Figures" tells the story of three pioneering women who worked at NASA during the Space Race and made significant contributions to the success of the space programs. The three African-American women — Mary Jackson, Katherine Goble Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughan — made their mark despite the troubles and challenges posed by racial segregation and gender bias, yet their

stories remained largely unrecognized, counting them as “hidden figures” for decades. In contemporary society, hidden figures most likely include people of color, women, and people with disabilities who make substantial contributions to society but remain undervalued because they often face barriers and systemic bias that hinder their paths to success.

The article “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership” describes a similar experience, as the authors use the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” to describe the obstacles women face in advancing to leadership roles throughout their careers. Women face issues of leadership style, family responsibilities, and gender prejudice, all of which impact their ability to accumulate and network social capital (Eagly & Carli, 2018). It is the dilemma of both recent and contemporary societies that we cannot easily see hidden figures because of historical biases — such as bias against Black people, societal norms, and a lack of representation in mainstream narratives, including women’s transformative roles in the success of various programs for their countries. Efforts to identify such hidden figures in society are crucial for creating an equitable society where everyone’s contributions are valued and acknowledged, irrespective of societal norms, racial segregation, color bias, and national discrimination.

References

- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2018). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. In *Contemporary issues in leadership* (pp. 147–162). Routledge.
- Melfi, T. (2016). *Hidden Figures*. Twentieth Century Fox.
- Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Sage Publications.