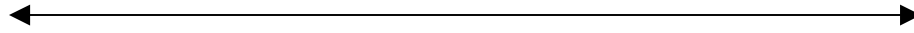


# UNPACKING LEADERSHIP:



## WHO GETS TO LEAD AND WHY?

### RACIAL TABOOS AND THE DYNAMICS OF LEADERSHIP

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This seminar focused on racial and sexual taboos, rooted in slavery and Jim Crow, and their impact on leaders and followers. The speaker, Dr. David Thomas, built upon an article he published in 1989 on racial taboos and cross-race, cross-gender mentoring relationships. In the article, he argued that these usually unconscious taboos create enough discomfort that both mentor and protégé often retreat to less personal and less satisfying relationships. He drew on this argument to explore how these taboos might circumscribe leadership practice.

After the talk, the audience met in small groups, followed by a full group discussion. This summary covers both the presentation and the discussion.

#### PRESENTATION

This work on racial taboos is informed by Embedded Intergroup Relations theory which argues that a relationship between two individuals is a microcosm of the larger inter-group dynamics in which they are embedded. This includes both organizational dynamics and larger societal level dynamics. It is also based on two other beliefs: 1) Systems Theory: units within an organization influence and are influenced by other units and the organization as a whole influences and is influenced by its external environment. 2) Psychoanalytic theory about the unconscious.

There are many ways in which race relations are problematic in this world and these dynamics affect what happens in the workplace. The result is, that even under favorable organizational conditions, where for example there are a good number of people of color and they have access to cross race developmental relationships, black and white Americans in these relationships often fail to connect in intimate and authentic ways.

## Overall thesis

1. This failure results from the social defenses that blacks and whites construct in response to the anxiety associated with intimate, cross-race interactions and the potential for the abuse of power.
2. These anxieties are rooted in racial taboos embedded in a psychohistory of racism in the United States.
3. Taboos operate on two levels: a) defining forbidden acts; b) prohibiting any reflection on what is forbidden, thus creating issues that are “undiscussible.”
4. The social defenses that blacks and whites develop to manage the vulnerability associated with violating taboos are most often unarticulated and left unexamined.
5. The most volatile of the taboos contain themes of race, sex and domination.
6. The violation of racial taboos can mobilize feelings of anxiety and fear in other people, and they may respond in destructive and undermining ways. This then raises the question of triangulation: We fear not just for ourselves, but about how we will be perceived --- what others will think of us and or do to us - if are in a close, authentic, intimate relationship across race.

## Racial taboos: Research findings from observation and interviews

1. Prohibition against cross-race sexual liaisons - this “undiscussable” has been observed in mentoring relationships, boss-subordinate dyads, and leadership studies
2. Belief that white superiors (psychoanalytically equivalent to parents) may prefer black subordinates (or the illegitimate children) over white subordinates (or the legitimate children) - this “undiscussable” has been observed in mentoring pairs and other research on race relations
3. Black power and the persecutor's anxiety. Because whites have participated in and benefited from the persecution of African Americans, there is an anxiety about payback: How could they not do what we have done to them? What is it going to be like if black people have real power? African Americans experience the other side of this racial taboo and the anxiety of: Can I really wield power in this system? Can I create an agenda that reflects all my interests? The two sides of this “undiscussable” have been observed in leadership studies and T-groups.

## First taboo: Cross-race sexual relations

Dr. Thomas provided some quotes from individuals he has interviewed as part of his research. (These quotes are not verbatim.)

Comment from an African American man in a developmental relationship with a white woman superior: I don't want to be seen too often talking with white women. There's a lot of history that

says that black men being familiar with white women isn't healthy. Maybe that's changing, but it's something you should have care about.

**Comment from a black woman:** Being seen with white men presents problems. White men are funny around black women and if one knows about history -- Actually, I should own the problem myself. I have a problem being seen with white men -- I'll be seen as a "white man's slut."

White man manager: (He was one of the few whites interviewed who articulated his discomfort.) I was told Kathy (a black woman) shared my interests but found I was staying away from her. I hooked up with all the other new junior people, but not her. I was attracted to her. She responded warmly but I was aware of a hesitancy, I wanted to withdraw. As if a taboo was operating.

From data such as these quotes, Dr. Thomas articulated some fears and risks associated with violating taboos.

Black men: One is risking well-being by daring a liaison with white women.

Black women: One is risking degradation and being violated. There is also a self-preservation paradox: To create a liaison with a powerful person can be beneficial to a woman, but there is a fear it will undermine black men and undermine one's desire to preserve racial identity.

White women: There is a risk that white men will withdraw support if a white woman has a relationship with a black man. If you cast your lot with a man of color, you must choose carefully: he must be someone who is seen as unequivocally as someone with a lot of power. I have personal experience with this taboo. My experience as a junior professor was that white women students doing research in an area I was expert in would go instead to white men. They would come to see me if a) they were in trouble; or b) someone told them: check out David, he's on the rise and could lock in resources for you. My reaction at the time was that this was racism on the part of the white women. Only later did I see that they were perhaps being motivated by a sense of their own vulnerability in the system.

White men: The risk is being viewed as an oppressor, having his way with black women.

In an effort to decrease power differences, white men will sometimes engage in an over-familiarity with black women. One black female student at Harvard Business School told me that the white men in her section engage her using black street language that they otherwise don't use.

Second taboo: Superiors and subordinates

This is rooted in slavery. Blacks are more aware of the history and the danger. Whites are less likely to be consciously anxious about this. Different pairs and people in different positions have different anxieties.

The parents' taboo: Illegitimate children can get the entitlements of legitimate children. Illegitimate children are products of scandalous liaisons. Affirmative action creates this experience: the power elite create a policy that redistributes opportunity, which re-ignites the anxiety of an "illegitimate" threat to white entitlement.

Blacks: African Americans are anxious over illegitimacy and abandonment. Black protégés would say: the mentor would choose the white protégé over me.

White superiors: They feel caught in-between, and may feel they are losing control. They become concerned about white backlash, even though they may outwardly defend Affirmative Action policies and processes.

Sanctions for those who violate taboos

1. Pressure to withdraw from the relationship, from someone in your group. Rumors about a sexual liaison begin to fly.
2. Stigmatization/Devaluation: People who create diverse, high-performing work units are not valued when it comes to promotion. People have said that it can have a negative to neutral effect on your career to do this kind of work.
3. Covert racialized/sexualized assault: Individuals involved in cross-race relationships become the object of slightly sexualized discussion, e.g., talk about dress or other elements of appearance.

How do these taboos constrain leadership and effectiveness?

1. They prevent deeper cross-race leader/follower relationships.
2. Self-presentation is consciously constrained to avoid mobilizing dysfunctional dynamics. For example, early in their career, women tone down their dress and other forms of self-presentation. As they gain power, they express themselves more. It would be worth testing this hypothesis: that black women would have less sexuality or femininity in their dress, compared to white women.
3. Developmental relationships will be less authentic, less deep and therefore less effective.
4. Work group boundaries, identification and commitment will be experienced as fragile.
5. Leaders are likely to feel under assault: will be questioned more and trusted less.
6. Members are likely to feel emotionally and socially distant from their leaders.
7. Leaders may choose to violate taboos in covert ways, risking being seen as duplicitous.
8. The leadership of efforts to improve race relations will be undervalued.

## DISCUSSION

Participants met in small groups by race and gender, meaning there were multiple groups of white women and of women of color, and one group of men.

The following themes emerged from the discussion:

## Experiences of black women and other women of color

- A number of women reported that they were familiar with the dynamics Dr. Thomas described. They noted:
- We understand now why leaders get devalued when they lead diversity efforts.
- We recognize the experience of avoiding social interaction in off-work time.
- We do dress conservatively at work.

They also spoke about other work-related experiences:

- We experience the projection that black women are not as ambitious as white women. When we are, it raises curiosity.
- Black women are not given the same support as they rise in an organization and they feel less entitled to ask for support. Women of color can feel defeated.
- Black/black mentoring pairs have been very helpful. Black mentors can pull you in, teach you the ropes.

Two Latinas briefly described their uncertainty about which discussion group to join. Both joined a woman of color discussion group.

## Experiences of white women

The reporter from one discussion group noted that her group wanted to be cross-racial rather than all white. She said they wanted to be a group of women to look at similarities and differences between white and black women. They wanted to discuss their commonality as women.

Another woman recounted an experience working for a black manager. She perceived that her aggressiveness and ability became a threat for him. Was that about blacks and whites? Men and women? What was it?

## Relationships between black and white women

A number of women of color noted that there had been no discussion of relationships between black and white women. Other comments included:

- What are the psychic costs of editing ourselves (women of color) and managing complicated relationships, especially with white women? What is our loss of identity, creativity, energy, and spontaneity?

- As women of color, are we more ready to deal with developing authentic relationships with white women? I haven't allowed myself to build an authentic relationship with a white straight man. When I've had the most success with white women, it's because we've agreed to work the dominance/subordination dynamics between us.
- We (women of color) see that white women will be protected by white men. White women can be treacherous, not supportive.
- White senior women and black women might have a hard time creating a developmental relationship because there is limited power for women altogether; such an alliance might reduce one's power further.

### Extending the theory as presented

A number of participants, both black and white, wondered how other dynamics would affect the understanding of racial taboos:

- How does one's personal marriage or sexual relationship influence - consciously or unconsciously - one's experience in the workplace?
- What about if the black mentor is gay? How would this affect the taboo?
- What about age? What happens when white women are older and no longer seen as sexual?
- What about sexual orientation and cross-sexual orientation relationships?
- What about class? What taboos are associated with cross class relationships?

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