NOTES ON THE INTRA-GROUP ORIGINS OF INTER-GROUP CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS: BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS AS AN EXEMPLAR

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Organizations, as arenas within which coordinated action takes place, must continually foster productive relationships among diverse groups of people. Moreover, to compete successfully in a global environment, American companies must understand the varied markets and populations they serve. The alignment of divergent interests, both inside and outside an organization, presents a series of challenges for leaders of contemporary firms. One dimension of difference shaping organizational life, a dimension that has considerable social, historical, and political significance in American society, is race.

Although the social science literature has long addressed the issue of race, organizational scholars have only recently begun to address race relations in organizational settings.¹ Attention to this area has increased within the past decade, though this research is often limited to the impact of

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¹ See Taylor Cox, Jr. & Stella M. Nkomo, Invisible Men and Women: A Status Report on Race as a Variable in Organization Behavior Research, 11 J. ORG. BEHAV. 419, 421 (1990). Cox and Nkomo found that of the organizational behavior literature published in twenty journals between 1964 and 1989, only 201 articles explicitly addressed race. See id. Nearly fifty percent of those articles were published in only two journals, and seventy percent were published in just four journals. See id. By comparison, out of a total of 11,804 articles on organizational behavior published in sixteen journals between 1971 and 1989, 313 articles addressed international issues, 426 articles addressed age, and 1,306 articles addressed gender. See id. at 422. These findings suggested that “the major outlets for OBHRM [organization behavior and human resource management] research [did] not contain a significant research base for understanding race in organizations.” Id. at 422.
race on employment issues such as pay, advancement, and access, and rarely examines the intricate dynamics that create these outcomes. As a result, our understanding of the nature of race dynamics in organizations is still in its infancy. For example, although many organizational researchers view racial conflict through an adversarial lens, this essay argues that the well-established adversarial view of racial conflict, which sees racial conflict as an outgrowth solely of inter-group prejudice, bias, and hostility, does not capture sufficiently the complicated and diffuse patterns of interaction that comprise race relations in organizations.

Several trends are emerging in the workplace that will fundamentally alter the way in which organizational scholars view race relations. First, organizations are beginning to address the concept of diversity. Many large American corporations have instituted diversity training programs to educate employees about the impact of categories of difference on organizational life. One aim of such training is to address the systemic and entrenched behavioral patterns that culminate in disparate outcomes for various organizational constituents. Employee participation in such diversity programs raises new challenges for those who study organizational activity. Employees, having acquired a rudimentary knowledge of diversity, are increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of the limitations of prevailing perspectives. They are eager for more in-depth knowledge of the highly complex racial exchanges they experience on a daily basis. They engage in lay hypothesis testing using their everyday experiences and are reluctant to accept explanations for racial dissension that lack depth, solidity, and comprehensiveness. In addition, they are interested in developing their capacity to formulate strategies for effectively managing complex racial dynamics.

The emphasis on diversity is heightened by a second trend toward viewing the individual as holding multiple roles. The assumption that the organizational role or position alone shapes the responsibilities, views, attitudes, and behavior of individuals is changing. Organizations are assisting employees in managing multiple roles, such as the roles associated with work and family. While in the past, organizations might have expected employees to subordinate other roles to those associated with work, managers are increasingly aware that individuals operate at the intersection of numerous roles, making compartmentalization and competition among the roles ineffective strategies for handling multiple

2. See William B. Johnston, Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the Twenty-First Century (1987). Johnston notes that by the year 2000, more women and minorities will be present in the workforce, profoundly affecting workplace policies and practices. See id. at 95-96.
3. See, e.g., William H. Whyte, Jr., The Organization Man 3-4 (1956).
sets of demands. Instead, organizations are acknowledging the interdependence among roles and are finding ways to allow employees to effectively balance their roles, with the expectation that employees will display a more energetic and focused commitment to their organizational roles.

A third trend is the expanding presence of blacks throughout the organizational hierarchy. Blacks have gained a foothold, beyond token membership, in previously all-white areas or units and are rising to managerial and executive levels in many American corporations. Their presence in positions of authority often has a jarring effect on long-standing beliefs and expectations about the nature of work, business practices, the ordering of organizational priorities, and the nature of work relationships. As blacks enter these new spaces, they often bring with them perspectives and insights that challenge and expand the way work is accomplished. In addition, they have a better means of ensuring that their voices are heard and that their input receives due consideration.

Lastly, organizations are increasingly dynamic because they are under intense domestic and global competitive pressures. These pressures require organizations to be flexible and adaptive, open to—rather than resistant to—exploring new ways of doing work, responsive to a varied customer base, and eager to take on new challenges. The dynamism in organizational functioning requires employees actively to embrace a level of complexity and uncertainty unlike any they have ever experienced as members of traditional, bureaucratic organizational companies that operate in stable environments. Organizations are actively creating and reinventing internal processes that seamlessly incorporate change into everyday business practices.

Against this organizational landscape, race relations as an area of inquiry will also undergo changes. The requirements of the next century

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4. See, e.g., Felice N. Schwartz, Management Women and the New Facts of Life, Harv. Bus. Rev., Jan.-Feb. 1989, at 65. Schwartz suggests that, for women, the role of maternity cannot be altered, but its impact on women in the workplace can be reduced via mechanisms such as flexible work schedules. See id. at 66.

5. See Patricia Hill Collins, Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought, 33 Soc. Probs.: Special Theory Issue 14 (1986) (observing that the unique position of black women as insiders, in that they have gained entry into organizations, and outsiders, in that they continue to operate at the periphery of these organizations, allows them to challenge existing organizational paradigms).

6. See, e.g., Tom Peters, Thriving on Chaos 7 (1988) (noting the increasingly uncertain and ambiguous environments in which organizations operate); see also Adam M. Brandenburger & Barry J. Nalebuff, Co-operation 4-5 (1997) (noting that relationships between organizations contain both competitive and cooperative elements).

mean that established models of race relations will be subjected to further theoretical development and testing.

The frame with which one observes black-white relations necessarily shapes perceptions, interpretations, and analyses of black-white exchanges. In the adversarial frame of black-white relations, the inter-group nexus, or series of actions and reactions across the racial boundary, serves as a focal point. This view positions blacks and whites on either side of the racial line while locating tension and conflict in the cross-race relationship. It assumes heterogeneity across racial groups, by assuming that whites and blacks differ in substantial and distinct ways, and homogeneity within each racial grouping, by assuming that little distinguishes whites from one another or blacks from one another. It relegates to the background the relationships operating within each of the groups; each group is assumed to be monolithic and to be operating with minimal, if any, internal strains. Such a division then makes cross-race conflict appear particularly intractable if whites and blacks do not feel competent about negotiating differences.

The adversarial frame also implies that conflict becomes manifest at its origin. Thus, conflict is immobile, and is best understood by examining places where it is visible and concentrated. When conflict erupts between blacks and whites, attention is directed toward an investigation of each side’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward the other. Conflict within the group is considered minimal. If conflict exists, it is relevant only insofar as it confirms that one group is united in its opposition to the other.

The adversarial frame fits well with organizational assumptions that dichotomize the nature of relationships. Dichotomizing is cognitively efficient and, because it reduces the discomfort associated with cognitive complexity, also has psychological benefits. However, this bifurcation focuses on the action and conflict between blacks and whites and obscures antecedent conditions among blacks and among whites that spawn cross-race conflict. This essay argues that intra-group and inter-group actions are not compartmentalized, independent, and isolated. Rather, a fluid interdependence exists between the two, with intra-group actions permeating inter-group actions and vice versa. Conflict is dynamic, active, and mobile, often moving subtly through sets of relationships.

8. The adversarial assumption about employer-employee relations includes the following beliefs: 1) that the “continuity of production” is of paramount importance and should be protected from employee interference; 2) that employees behave irresponsibly; 3) that employees have “inferior status” in the labor-management partnership and “owe a measure of respect and deference to their employers”; and 4) that because the organization is owned and operated by the employer, employees cannot be full partners in the organization. JAMES B. ATLESON, VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS IN AMERICAN LABOR LAW 7-9 (1983).

9. See Kenwyn K. Smith, The Movement of Conflict in Organizations: The Joint
If we genuinely are to capture race relations and to break open entrenched and resistant patterns of behavior that sustain problematic interactions, we must revisit widely-held assumptions about racial conflict. The purpose of this essay, then, is to reconsider the adversarial frame and to offer, in a preliminary way, an alternative explanation for black-white conflict. This essay is intended to expand the discussion which dominates research and discourse on race from one which centers exclusively on destructive aspects of cross-race interactions to one that thoughtfully considers constructive efforts. Alliance-based black-white interactions are impacted by within-race dynamics. The latter may be adversarial and may place pressure on, or ultimately destroy, cross-race relationships.

Consider the following example of the way in which within-race dynamics can affect black-white relations. During a session on culture change, a group of managers were discussing the best way to begin the initiative. A black middle manager noted the need to ensure that the culture change was communicated in a way that employees at all hierarchical levels could understand. Valerie, a white senior manager, commented that some employees would not understand it as it had been articulated for the managerial group—it would have to be stated in a way the employees could understand. A second white senior manager attacked Valerie’s comment as racist, since minorities were concentrated in the lower levels of the organization. Valerie protested, saying that her intention had not been to insult employees but to acknowledge their different perspectives on the culture change. The black manager indicated that he was not offended by her remark. At this point, the white CEO stepped in to support Valerie, indicating that he thought she had made an innocent comment. Others joined in, insisting that her comment was racist, and demanding that Valerie acknowledge it as such. The debate escalated with the division, either real or imagined, deepening between blacks and whites. Later, all of the participants looked back on the incident with confusion, uncertainty, guilt, and regret.

Using the adversarial inter-group frame, Valerie’s comment must be interpreted as racist. Thus, the white managers who had been taught to confront their own prejudices thought they were doing so. Throughout the remaining portion of the session, Valerie was afraid to speak, for fear of being misinterpreted and attacked. The black manager also fell silent, partly embarrassed that, in some way, he was the reason she had been vigorously confronted.

*Dynamics of Splitting and Triangulation*, 34 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 1, 1 (1989).

Additional data from this interaction highlights the role of intra-group dynamics in creating the tensions among the managers. For example, on other occasions, among whites, Valerie had expressed her belief that individuals differ in their intellectual capabilities. Some of the white managers confronted her at these times, but the intensity of their arguments was at its highest during the above exchange. This account vividly illustrates the pattern that is the focus of this essay. Unresolved intra-group conflict (in this example, conflict among whites) migrates into an inter-group exchange (in this example, an exchange between blacks and whites). Intra-group conflict ultimately is expressed as inter-group conflict and damages a previously cooperative cross-race relationship.

This essay is not intended to suggest that cross-race prejudice, bias, and hostility are not significant problems; the evidence supporting the continued prevalence of such troublesome attitudes and behaviors is clear. However, these problems do not provide a complete picture of the phenomenon of cross-race relations. Addressing cross-race antipathy is alone insufficient to change the character of race relations. The adversarial and alliance-based frames together reflect the complexity of the relationship between blacks and whites and thus can provide valuable insight into race relations in organizations.

The first part of this essay revisits the adversarial inter-group frame around which the current approach to race relations is centered, and offers the alliance-based inter-group frame as a necessary complement. The second part of this essay presents organizational data that illustrate the influence of intra-group dynamics on inter-group exchanges. The third part of this essay discusses methodological considerations for the two frames. Finally, this essay presents a summary with an eye toward the future of contemporary American organizations.

I. RECONSIDERING THE ADVERSARIAL FRAME OF BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS

Using an adversarial inter-group frame on race relations situates blacks and whites on opposing sides with unequal power. Whites are viewed as insiders who wield power and influence over blacks.\textsuperscript{11} Under this view, race and position are inextricably linked and positively correlated, reflecting historical patterns of segregation within organizations. These patterns placed whites at higher levels, or in more mainstream, key

\textsuperscript{11} See, e.g., David A. Thomas & Karen L. Proudford, Theory for Practice: Making Sense of Race Relations in Organizations, in ADDRESSING CULTURAL ISSUES: BEYOND THE CORPORATE CONTEXT (Robert Carter ed., forthcoming 1999) (manuscript at 2, on file with authors) (noting the development of a dynamic where whites are victimizers and blacks are victims).
areas and blacks at lower levels, or in marginal roles. The implication is that little alignment exists between the interests of blacks and whites; blacks and whites are likely to be on opposing sides whether the topic of concern is social or organizational in nature. However, over the last several decades, the changing roles of blacks in organizations have blurred the rigid distinctions between blacks and whites. Blacks are entering previously all-white areas within organizations and are rising to executive levels. To the extent that his level of responsibility, access to opportunity, rate of advancement, and the like do not match those of a similarly qualified white peer, a black manager may be viewed as lacking power and may have interests which contradict those of whites. However, to the extent that he holds responsibility over employees, holds responsibility over financial, material, and other resources, exercises discretion, and has accountability for organizational results, the black manager holds power and influence and may find his interests to be consonant with those of similarly-placed whites.

Likewise, whites cannot be positioned automatically in opposition to blacks. Although whites may have access to key informal and social networks that facilitate their advancement on the job, they may nevertheless be in hierarchically lower positions and less able to wield influence over the working lives of employees. Therefore, their interests may be closely aligned with those of blacks in similar positions. Thus, the relationship between blacks and whites is multi-faceted, with interests that are aligned and interests that are not.

The disaggregation of race and position makes an alliance-based inter-group frame plausible. The alliance-based frame begins with the assumption that interests across race are aligned, making the cross-race relationship a cooperative one. Controversies exist, however, within racial groups. Under the alliance-based frame, blacks and whites are not homogeneous, monolithic groups that are united in attitudes and beliefs. While the adversarial inter-group frame would suggest that if one white is against blacks, all whites are against blacks (and vice versa), the alliance-based inter-group frame implies that the controversies appear among blacks and among whites and influence exchanges between blacks and whites.

Intra-group dynamics receive less attention than cross-race dynamics,
despite the fact that they may be powerful contributors to inter-group hostility. The following case illustrates the implications of the disaggregation of role and race for within-race conflict:

The first black woman superintendent of public schools in a middle-sized urban community had held the position less than three years when she became involved in a series of angry disagreements with the Board of Education. From the reports of their conflicts in the public news, I was impressed by the fact that the one board member who consistently led the confrontation was also a black woman. No other voices on the board seemed to equal hers in opposition to the superintendent's handling of the business of public education or in support of her leadership.

I suspect that the board member who levied the harsh criticisms was doing so on behalf of at least the majority of the board. She was delegated to set the stage for the embarrassment of the superintendent, and for even more drastic action in the future. I am proposing that it was not by accident that the leadership for the opposition was assumed by a black female.

Note that Dumas focuses on the inter-group exchange in her assessment of the encounter. She describes the board member as acting "on behalf of" whites and as having been "delegated" this role. It is equally plausible, however, that the black board member, acting alone, questioned or wanted to undermine the capabilities of the black manager.

15. See Annelise Goldstein et al., Who's on Top: Unchanging Demographic Patterns in Organizations (Aug. 1995) (unpublished manuscript, on file with authors). The authors suggest that both whites and blacks are influenced by powerful slavery metaphors that follow the historical pattern of relationships between blacks and whites. See id. at 29-30. The authors found that the slavery metaphor was most striking because both whites and blacks adhered to it. See id. Not only did some whites believe that whites were superior, but some blacks believed it as well. See id. Not only did some whites support whites at the top of the organization, but some blacks did as well. See id. Some blacks were more comfortable working for whites. See id. These blacks acted in ways to protect the interests of whites and were reluctant to work with other blacks. See id.

The use of metaphors to explain organizational life is accepted practice in organizational literature. The slavery metaphor was not intended to suggest that the institution of slavery was still in operation; rather, it was intended to provide a simple means of expressing a complex organizational dynamic. Robert Denhardt observes that the psychodynamics of organizations are complex. See Robert B. Denhardt, Images of Death and Slavery in Organizational Life, 13 J. MGMT. 529 (1987). Denhardt states that "we should recognize the obvious—that strictly cognitive or behavioral description[s] of the relationship between superiors and subordinates in complex organizations fail to grasp the psychological complexity of that relationship. There is simply much more going on than meets the eye." Id. at 535-36.


17. See id.
The way in which "intra-actions," or intra-group exchanges, can exacerbate inter-group tensions is particularly striking in cross-race mentoring relationships. David Thomas, who has observed intra-group tensions in cross-race mentoring relationships, explains that certain racial taboos influence intra-actions to the detriment of the mentor-mentee relationship.\(^8\) These taboos include: 1) "[w]hite [men] having unlimited sexual access to black [women],"\(^9\) 2) "[b]lack [men] sexually approaching white [women],"\(^20\) 3) white men lessening the power of other white men when mentoring a black man,\(^21\) and 4) black women "abandoning" their men to work with white men.\(^22\) Thomas argues that the spell of these taboos results not just from their existence, but also from the silence surrounding them.\(^23\) Even discussing the taboo relationships is taboo, making it virtually impossible to address these issues productively.\(^24\) Thomas points out that "[a] black man mentoring a white female may upset white men. A black female’s supportive alliance with a white man can upset black men."\(^25\) He cites a scenario in which a white woman being mentored by a black man was advised that if she kept "hanging around with this black man too much, it [would] damage [her] career."\(^26\) Thomas offers another example of a black woman who was criticized by black men for "aligning herself" with "white boys."\(^27\) Another black woman stayed away from white men for fear of being labeled a "white man’s slut."\(^28\) Such intra-actions stall what might have developed into supportive mentoring relationships.\(^29\) Too often intra-group tensions prompt one or both parties to withdraw from the mentoring relationship.\(^30\) These within-race tensions drive behavior as much as can antipathy toward or stereotypes about the opposite group.\(^31\)

\(^{18}\) See David A. Thomas, Mentoring and Irrationality: The Role of Racial Taboos, 28 HUM. RESOURCE MGMT. 279, 280 (1989).
\(^{19}\) Id. at 285.
\(^{20}\) Id.
\(^{21}\) See id.
\(^{22}\) See id.
\(^{23}\) See id. at 281.
\(^{24}\) See id.
\(^{25}\) Id. at 284.
\(^{26}\) Id. at 283.
\(^{27}\) Id. at 282.
\(^{28}\) Id. at 281.
\(^{29}\) See id. at 286.
\(^{30}\) See id.

31. Intra-group and inter-group influences can act together to create pernicious dynamics. People involved in cross-race mentoring relationships must overcome both intra-group and inter-group influences that may be detrimental to the relationship. The following hypothetical illustration is drawn from the author's research and consulting experience and demonstrates how in the mentoring scenario, as in many organizational scenarios, both intra-group and inter-group dynamics can operate to undermine black-white relationships.
Finally, the adversarial inter-group frame suggests that conflict expressed in cross-race terms begins at the inter-group nexus or indicates latent conflict in the inter-group nexus. By contrast, the alliance-based inter-group frame recognizes that the conflict may have its beginnings in other relationships and then may migrate into the inter-group relationship. It may follow the path of relationships such that it travels around the organization. Moreover, it may be transformed as it moves. In the earlier example regarding Valerie, conflict began among whites about Valerie’s perceived elitism, then migrated into a cross-race exchange where it was expressed as racial conflict. Conflicts which move, escalate, and change in this way often are so confusing and diffuse that parties to the conflict lose sight of the original disagreement.

This dynamic view of conflict is linked to the fact that blacks and whites are managing at least two sets of interactions: cross-race interactions

See, e.g., Proudford, supra note 10.

The white mentor must avoid exchanges with his black protege that involve stereotypes, assumptions, misunderstandings, irreconcilable conflict, long stretches without contact, pauses, or silences. In addition to managing this formidable set of inter-group dynamics, the white mentor may receive stares from his or her white counterparts, and then ambiguous questions: How did you choose that person? Why did you choose that person? People may stare as they view the two together. There may be silence when, as the white counterparts are discussing their proteges, the mentor asks them their opinion of his protege. In addition, white counterparts may be jealous that the white mentor has been able to build a positive relationship with a black protege, for the white counterparts may have no idea how to do so. Other intra-group actions may signal uncertainty about the mentoring relationship. For example, whites may begin to question the judgment and decision making abilities of the mentor on a variety of topics. The white mentor, aware of subtle unwritten norms, then must decide how much to commit to the mentoring relationship. He may begin to withdraw support—slowly, subtly, and without discussion. He may withhold performance feedback for fear of igniting inter-group tensions or being accused of racism. An accusation of racism can be devastating. If accused of racism, the mentor would be outcast by whites that do not want to be associated with the ignorance of racism or the shame and guilt of an accusation of racism. The white mentor would then be labeled an enemy by blacks and an outcast by whites.

The black protege faces an equally precarious situation. When he announces to his peers that he is working with a white mentor, they may joke with him about being “somebody’s boy.” If they have not established a similar relationship, they may be jealous. They may begin to view him as “chosen” or “special” and exclude him from events because they assume he would not want to be involved. Similarly, they may encourage him to pursue his relationship with his white mentor, but they may also admonish him to keep his mouth shut, never challenge the mentor, and cooperate just enough to ensure the mentor’s continued support. The black protege may then become suspicious about the mentor’s intentions. He may scrutinize the mentor’s advice, staying attuned for covert expressions of racism. Eventually he may become cynical and withdraw from the relationship.

32. See Smith, supra note 9, at 1.
33. See id.
34. These conflicts have been described as “wildfires” because they appear in an instant, escalate quickly, spread rapidly, and are difficult to manage and control. See Proudford, supra note 10, at 175.
and within-race interactions. Because blacks and whites operate at the intersection of those two sets of interactions, their patterns of behavior are interdependent rather than compartmentalized. The boundary between intra-group and inter-group exchanges is highly permeable, creating a fluid interdependence between the two exchanges. Tension can begin at multiple points,\(^3\) within or among blacks or whites, and then can be expressed across race.

In sum, the current view of race relations in organizations is predicated almost exclusively on an adversarial inter-group frame which assumes that the interests of blacks and whites are wholly contradictory and that cross-race conflict originates from the inter-group relationship. However, contemporary black-white relations in organizations are more complex, reflecting both a trend toward complex role sets of each group and a fluid interdependence between inter-group and intra-group exchanges. The alliance-based frame highlights race relations in which cross-race interactions are constructive but also are obstructed by problematic within-race dynamics. When one suspends the adversarial inter-group assumption and adopts an alliance-based one, this pattern of behavior becomes visible. Used conjunctively, the adversarial and alliance-based inter-group frames provide valuable insight into complex black-white relations in organizations.

II. THE INFLUENCE OF INTRA-GROUP DYNAMICS ON INTER-GROUP EXCHANGES: TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

This section presents data from two sets of cross-race interactions in an organization.\(^3\) The data are presented in order to highlight the pattern outlined above and are not intended to present a complete picture of all of the interactions that took place. The organization, Eastern Bank, is a large regional bank holding company with approximately 14,000 employees and operations in three states. After receiving negative feedback from an employee survey, top managers at Eastern Bank began a series of initiatives aimed at changing its conservative, bureaucratic mode of operation that was dominated by whites, males, and most particularly, white males. The effort spanned several years, beginning with diversity training, then moving toward an effort to promote quality and empowerment in the workplace. During this period, numerous employee groups were formed, each charged with contributing to the culture change effort. Of the following two examples of how intra-group interactions

\(^{35}\) See Smith, supra note 9, at 1.

\(^{36}\) See Proudford, supra note 10. The data on the groups discussed here were gathered for, but only partially reported in, the author's dissertation. The names of the organization, groups, and individuals have been changed in order to protect confidentiality.
affected inter-group interactions, the first discusses the relationship between the Black Women's Alliance and the Executive Women's Group; the second discusses the dynamics of a conference held to address the concerns of people of color in a particular work unit.37

A. Coalition-Building Between the Black Women's Alliance ("BWA") and Executive Women's Group ("EWG")

The Black Women's Alliance ("BWA") and Executive Women's Group ("EWG") were resource groups in the Bank that represented the interests of their organizational constituencies. Members of the groups knew each other from daily work assignments and from recent appointments to the same committees dealing with culture change. What began as a cordial professional relationship between the two groups escalated into one filled with mistrust, tension, and suspicion. Dynamics among the black women and among the white women fed this deterioration. One central issue was whether race or gender would be the focus if the two groups were to work together to advocate on behalf of women in the Bank. The EWG, a group of white executive-level managers, aimed to address women's concerns about job advancement, opportunity, access, and treatment. In advocating on behalf of women, the EWG assumed that it addressed the concerns of black women. From the BWA perspective, race had to be addressed explicitly; the fact that the EWG had no black members indicated to the BWA members that the EWG was unable or unwilling to address its own race issues. Black members began to see this inability or unwillingness as evidence that the white women thought they were superior to black women, and the division between the two groups became rigid. The EWG members viewed the black women as recalcitrant; it seemed that the BWA would work with the EWG only if the BWA set the conditions of the partnership.

The description, thus far, captures the adversarial frame. However, the relationship between the groups was more complicated. First, members of both groups were balancing dual roles. The members of the EWG were top managers, though not as senior as some of their male counterparts. Although members of the EWG focused on their relative lack of power with respect to gender, they were, as executives and as whites, quite powerful in the organization. Within the EWG, members struggled with the contradictions of their race and gender roles and were ambivalent about acknowledging their power and their impact on blacks, particularly black women. The EWG was also divided along generational lines; younger

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37. The conference nominally included all people of color; however, the employee group was predominately black.
EWG members disagreed with the confrontational approach of the older members since, in their view, gender had less of an impact on their working lives. They thought that the older members were overreacting. The older and more senior EWG members succeeded in defining the challenges as gender-based, and they approached the BWA with an agenda that implied that both groups were equally powerless in the organization. This implications created tension since the BWA clearly saw the EWG as advantaged because of race.

Meanwhile, the BWA was struggling with its own set of internal issues. It consciously and actively suppressed internal dissent in order to focus on the relationship with the EWG. The members of the BWA had explicit discussions about individual black women who were interested in joining the group but were deemed inappropriate because they were not sufficiently vocal, forceful, able and willing to describe experiences in painful detail, or committed to the group’s goals. The BWA members also had dual roles; they were relatively powerless because of race but, as mid-level managers, they had power and influence. They overlooked their power as managers and focused on the powerlessness of race. If a member mentioned their power as mid-level managers, that member’s view was suppressed. When the group discussed the EWG’s offer to form a partnership, the offer was rejected. Moderate positions were silenced. As the group sought cohesion and loyalty from members, it became galvanized against the EWG. Conflict within the BWG was submerged (so that its members looked united to outsiders) and expressed in the cross-race relationships with the EWG. The escalating tension between the BWA and the EWG reached a boiling point when a CEO told the BWA that the EWG had said that the two groups had not agreed to work together because the BWA was “uncooperative.” This revelation led to an open confrontation between the BWA and both the EWG and CEO.

The BWA addressed its intra-group differences with respect to socioeconomic class, education, work status, age, and skin color only after resolving the external conflicts. At one of their meetings, one member announced that she had recently been promoted to senior management. Though this was one of the group’s key goals, the woman tearfully told the group that she had not wanted to tell the group about her promotion because she had been afraid that, given her short tenure in the organization, the group would be resentful.

The EWG-BWA relationship reflects aspects of the alliance-based frame because internal struggles influenced cross-race ones. Though the stereotypes that the groups held about each other were consistent with the adversarial inter-group frame, some members of both groups were seeking cooperative relationships. However, the internal dynamics within each group did not allow for cooperation. The conflict flowed between intra-
group and inter-group exchanges. Conflict that was expressed across race
did not originate solely in response to the other group. It sometimes
reflected the internal struggles of either group. Moreover, the multiple
expressions of conflict were related. Conflict within the EWG about issues
such as age led to an increased commitment to gender issues. When the
EWG approached the BWA, seeking their commitment to a gender-based
agenda, a conflict about race emerged. The alliance-based frame
highlighted the subtle indirect connection between age and race conflicts.

B. Establishing a Dialogue Between Majority Managers and Minority
Employees

The Conference on Minority Concerns ("CMC") was held by an
operations unit within Eastern Bank. The two-day conference brought
sixty minority employees together to identify concerns and develop
recommendations to be implemented by senior managers. The purpose of
the conference was to include lower-level employees in the diversity
initiative. The participants varied in their work status, work location, age,
and gender.

At the beginning of the session, the conference facilitator stressed that
management had agreed to respond to all of the group’s recommendations.
Members of the group discussed their concerns in smaller groups and then
met in a plenary session to debrief and integrate their ideas.

The facilitator guided and focused the discussion, particularly when
new issues or intense debates began to arise. Three major internal
dynamics were developing. One theme which surfaced continually was
how people were chosen to participate in the group. Who made the
decision and for what purpose? Were members chosen because they were
vocal on the job? Were they chosen because they were troublemakers?
Were they leaders in their areas? Group members spent considerable
amount of energy trying to determine the basis for their participation.

Second, some participants were happy with their work and with
Eastern Bank. They were reluctant to hold management accountable for
any problems. They noted that people of color often did not treat each
other well and that such inter-group dynamics were as important as the
dynamics between employees and management.

Third, a leadership struggle was developing within the group. The
group knew its recommendations would be presented to management and
was anxious about who would speak and what would be conveyed. One
man and one woman were very articulate and persuasive. The group
seemed persuaded by both individuals, and because everyone was to be
invited to the session with management, the group gladly did not have to
make a decision about which individual would take the lead. The man and
woman agreed on substantive issues but the woman presented them in a much more forthright, vivid, and impassioned way. The man, on the other hand, presented the issues with an even, concerned, but distant tone. He preferred to approach the managers in a collegial manner, while she wanted a direct confrontation. When debate swirled around how to approach management, the facilitator would intervene to direct the attention of the group back to the initial set of concerns.

On the management side, there were two key issues of contention. First, the managers disagreed about whether sessions should be limited to people of color. Some managers wondered if limiting the session to people of color would suggest that people of color were getting preferential treatment. In addition, some managers felt certain that any existing problems primarily stemmed from differences in hierarchical level rather than differences in race. However, the head of the unit was firmly committed to the sessions. Any conflict was suppressed and the session was held.

Approximately four months after the conference, management held a feedback session. The management group consisted of nine whites and one Hispanic. All of the CMC members were invited to attend, and twenty did so. Like the conference, the session was highly structured. A subset of the themes and action steps that had been developed at the CMC were posted. The managers and employees then worked in small groups discussing the gains and risks of implementing the action steps. The group then reconvened for further discussion of the gains and risks.

The debate between the employees who liked their supervisors and jobs and those who did not, did not surface in the session with management, nor did the questions about the selection of participants. However, the leadership dynamic that had surfaced at the conference reappeared immediately. The man and the woman were quite vocal during the feedback session. The man appeared to be gaining the ear of management, causing the woman to become even more impassioned. Managers responded to her either by denying the veracity of what she said or by noting that she was exaggerating the severity of the problem and inappropriately linking the problems to race. The tension between the managers and employees escalated until the facilitator intervened.

Both managers and employees appeared relieved when the session ended. The managers indicated that while they had not heard anything new in terms of action items and recommendations, they had been surprised by the level of frustration and the intensity of the emotion behind what the employees had said. They were impressed with a black male who they felt had spoken eloquently and dispassionately (in contrast with the black female), and he was later promoted out of the business unit.

The CMC example again highlights the utility of the alliance-based
frame in gaining a fuller understanding of cross-race conflict. Tension within the CMC and within the management group ultimately flowed into the joint meeting. This tension stemmed from unresolved controversies within each group.

Use of the alliance-based frame elevates previously unexplored intra-group dynamics. Conflict that is expressed across race can reflect problems with the other race but can also reflect problems within one race. Differences within one's own race may lead to cross-race difficulties. These inter-group differences do not have to be explicitly about race or articulated in racial terms. In the EWG, for example, the controversies were across age and about women; however, these controversies still can have consequences in terms of cross-race interactions. The fluid interdependence between inter-group and intra-group exchanges links the two exchanges in subtle ways that best can be captured using both the adversarial and alliance-based frames.

III. CAPTURING INTRA-GROUP DYNAMICS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Those who research organizations face significant challenges if they are to conduct research which builds upon our understanding of race relations in organizations. One of the most significant challenges for researchers is to capture sensitive inter-group and intra-group data. The glances, silences, and exchanges that make up the coded insider language of a group are particularly difficult to characterize and interpret. Most likely, these interactions will not be included in survey or interview responses. Further, due to the potential volatility of the subject matter, participants in organizational research may be unwilling to relay insider data about race-related dynamics.

Occasionally, we are able to obtain a glimpse of intra-actions. For example, Peggy McIntosh has written about white intra-actions. She calls white privilege an "invisible knapsack": "[a]s a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage."\(^{38}\) McIntosh further states:

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing

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in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable.\textsuperscript{39}

In a similarly reflective manner, Naomi Wolf examines "the racism of well-meaning white people":\textsuperscript{40}

As WMWPs [well-meaning white people] describe an African American's having received a coveted job, promotion or fellowship, the merest flicker of a glance will pass among them, and everyone knows that the whole history of affirmative action is in that glance. When someone finally speaks, he will say, "Of course, Harvard [or the Fourth Circuit, or \textit{The New York Times} op-ed page] should have an African American [man, woman]." The unspoken sentence is: Then we can get back to a real meritocracy—that is to say, \textit{my} career. In that glance—the glance of tokenism satisfied—black careers get derailed, horizons lowered and economic opportunities shut off. In this way WMWPs' racism can actually be more destructive than the gutter kind, which is often practiced by people with little real power. The attitude captured in that cocktail-party moment is harder to confront than any door marked Whites Only.\textsuperscript{41}

These passages are important because they contain candid descriptions of white intra-actions. Devising research plans which enable this type of data to be captured is a key step in understanding the influence of these dynamics. Informal organizational forces are effective and efficient in silencing this type of information.

Sometimes we obtain data from which we can speculate about intra-group dynamics. Linda Powell describes her striking experience with intra-group dynamics:

I was a high school senior planning to attend college. By virtue of SAT scores I was both a State Scholar (one of the top students in the state) and a National Achievement Semifinalist (a student of African American descent). I received recruitment letters from colleges around the country. One of the most prestigious universities in my state sent me two letters. The first was addressed to the State Scholar, and assured me that I was among the best and the brightest; they were delighted to consider offering me admission, and it would be their honor to train me for

\textsuperscript{39} Id.

\textsuperscript{40} Naomi Wolf, \textit{The Racism of Well-Meaning White People}, GLAMOUR, Aug. 1985, at 230.

\textsuperscript{41} Id. at 249 (brackets in original).
the leadership that I would (inevitably) provide for my community and my country. . . . The second letter was addressed to the National Achievement scholar; it focused on what a wonderful university it was, how fortunate I would be to have the chance to attend and how many remedial and supportive programs were in place to help me when I (inevitably) ran into difficulty at this world-class university.\footnote{42}

The assumptions about blacks that could be inferred from the National Achievement Scholar letter are disquieting. Given the experience of many blacks on predominantly white campuses, assistance with social integration might be more appropriate than academic assistance. However, equally troubling are: 1) "the existence of two letters"\footnote{43} and 2) the intra-group messages conveyed in the State Scholar letter. Taken together, these letters send an implicit message about the superiority of whites and about the confidence placed in white achievement. One might assume that no whites fail to meet expectations or no whites experience academic challenges in college. Assuming that the letters were drafted by whites (though it would be equally troubling and in line with the argument of this essay if they were drafted by blacks), they may provide evidence of intra-group exchanges which perpetuate race-based attitudes. One might speculate about the nature and impact of those attitudes on behavior. When a white person needs assistance, it is viewed as an exception; there is a "rational" explanation. It requires no further comment, no paragraph in the Scholar's letter to acknowledge the possibility. When whites speak privately about the shortcomings of whites and publicly about the shortcomings—potential or realized—of blacks, another disturbing dynamic develops. Whites find themselves conflicted about race. They may argue (in defense of the National Achievement Scholar letter) that "everyone needs help sometimes," and that they know personally of cases in which whites needed help. However, the State Scholar letter gives no indication of the possibility of white underachievement. Open or tacit agreements among whites, agreements not to mention cases of white underachievement, may influence cross-race exchanges. Therefore, data collection efforts should be aimed at further investigation of intra-group dynamics to determine the extent to which these dynamics influence inter-group dynamics.

Researchers who are able to obtain data about intra-group exchanges must determine its relevance to research questions and methodologies. Often the group memberships of the researchers impact the researchers'
research questions, methodologies, and analyses.\textsuperscript{44} Both black and white researchers may be dissuaded from conducting research on race, though in different ways.\textsuperscript{45} As a result, detailed accounts of racial dynamics are rare in organizational literature. Moreover, the accounts are often decontextualized and placed in an abstract framework. This decontextualization reflects, in part, the controversy in academia about race research.\textsuperscript{46} To the extent that researchers dismiss the impact of race as an important influence in shaping organizational life, research on race relations is lacking.

Stella Nkomo argues persuasively for the inclusion of race as an analytical category for theorizing about organizational life.\textsuperscript{47} She criticizes the prevailing ethnicity-based views which lead researchers to formulate questions such as the following: "[d]oes discrimination exist in recruitment, selection, etc.?";\textsuperscript{48} "[d]o blacks' and whites' problem-solving styles differ?";\textsuperscript{49} and "[h]ow can organizations comply with equal employment opportunity/affirmative action requirements?"\textsuperscript{50} Nkomo suggests that including race as an analytical category raises alternative questions such as: "[h]ow are societal race relations reproduced in the workplace?";\textsuperscript{51} "[h]ow do organizational processes contribute to the maintenance of racial domination and stratification?";\textsuperscript{52} and "[w]hy, despite national policies like affirmative action, does inequality still exist in the workplace?"\textsuperscript{53}

The latter set of questions is not based on an adversarial inter-group frame but rather recognizes race as fundamental in shaping critical organizational outcomes. In addition, the latter questions acknowledge the role of both white and black organizational members in creating and sustaining racial dynamics. Note that race need not be mentioned explicitly in order for racial implications to exist. Such was true in the EWG example, where conflict among whites dealt, in part, with age differences. These unresolved disagreements contributed to racial tension between the


\textsuperscript{46} See id.


\textsuperscript{48} Id. at 506.

\textsuperscript{49} Id.

\textsuperscript{50} Id.

\textsuperscript{51} Id.

\textsuperscript{52} Id.

\textsuperscript{53} Id.
EWG and the BWA. These results suggest the importance of integrating intra-group data into fundamental questions about organizational processes rather than viewing them as isolated, ad hoc cases of discrimination and prejudice.

Formulating questions in this way necessarily requires that whites be viewed as belonging to a race in the organizational context. Otherwise, the term “race” will continue to be interpreted as “black” or “minority,” and, unless they are acting directly against blacks, the behavior of whites will not be viewed in racial terms. Questions such as Nkomo’s reinforce the central point of this essay—a nearly exclusive focus on the inter-group nexus leads researchers to compare the groups rather than to examine the adversarial intra-group processes and alliance-based inter-group processes (such as those that foster shared cultural values and widely-accepted beliefs across race) that drive organizational behavior.

54. For example, few discussions address race-based preferential treatment for whites. Rather, blacks are assumed to be the recipients of racially preferential treatment and protection. Whites who gain access to organizations through family connections and networks of friends and colleagues are not viewed as having received race-based preferential treatment, nor are such occurrences as heavily scrutinized as are the opportunities afforded blacks.

55. See, e.g., Proudford, supra note 10, at 101-05 (1996) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania) (on file with author) (noting that whites do not perceive race as salient when they interact with one another; thus, whites are unlikely to view their behavior in racial terms (even though blacks will view the behavior of whites in racial terms)). The dynamics between majorities and minorities within an organization affect the type of group membership (either demographic or organizational) with which individuals identify. Majority and minority members have a heightened awareness of those aspects of organizational life that are important to them and make them vulnerable. Whites see distinctions that reflect their experience in a predominantly white organization—like gender, class, and age—while blacks see distinctions that reflect their experience—predominantly race. These distinctions shift as the environment shifts. Whites who find themselves in predominantly black settings (for example, when a black supervisor enters the room) may begin to “see” race, even though they may have previously thought that race was irrelevant. Yet race moves to the background for a black employee when a black supervisor enters the room. Blacks then become aware of class, education, and other differences.

A personal experience made this phenomenon particularly salient for me. Having attended a predominantly white institution, I was accustomed to viewing behavior through a race lens. When I moved to a predominantly black institution, race became less of a source of identification for me. One day a white colleague suggested to me that black students did not visit him during office hours, in part because he was white. I immediately dismissed this assertion; it was not race, I reasoned, but rather his short tenure on the faculty that discouraged black students from visiting him. I then realized what I had just said. Clearly I had reacted from my position as a member of the majority for whom race was not as significant an issue. It was certainly plausible, if not likely, that race would impact my white colleague’s relationship with his students.

56. The same issue exists in practice. For example, some approaches to diversity training are predicated upon an assumption that inter-group contact is necessary in order to bring about change. However, the demographic composition of most organizations makes this highly unlikely. When whites and blacks are largely internally segregated, they may
Data analysis is also influenced by the use of the adversarial or alliance-based frame. The choice of frame influences what weight we attach to data, the relevancy we give these data, and the explanations we provide for them. We may interpret mixed-race interactions through an adversarial lens. However, it is important to consider alternative perspectives. One study, for example, found that racial diversity had a detrimental effect on the level of attachment that whites had to their firm; the more minorities, the lower the level of attachment reported by whites.\textsuperscript{57} Whites working in units with no minorities were the most attached to their units.\textsuperscript{58} By contrast, minorities’ attitudes toward the firm were not affected by the number of whites.\textsuperscript{59} The researchers reasoned that because minorities (and women) are less powerful and lower in social status, workers that work with them feel that they are working in an inferior area.\textsuperscript{60} This conclusion narrowly defines the problem by focusing on the negative perceptions whites hold about the status of minorities and by overlooking intra-group influences. It is equally plausible that whites are indifferent about working with minorities and are simply interested in working with other whites.

have only the most superficial contact. In these cases, contact between blacks and whites may exacerbate tensions.

However, diversity training founded on this assumption makes contact necessary. Facilitators assist the two groups in understanding each other. It is viewed as particularly important for whites to acknowledge and confront their stereotypes about blacks. To this end, blacks in companies with a small number of minorities may have to relate their personal and professional histories numerous times so that whites can hear vivid accounts of the effects of racism. However, helping whites understand blacks is insufficient to alter the entrenched behavioral patterns that undergird racism in organizations. Unless trainers compel whites to consider “whiteness,” participants exit the training believing that they have become enlightened enough to change problematic behavior. Whites who return to all-white work units quickly realize that they may have acquired a skill set that allows them to confront only the most egregious incidents of racism; they have learned little about the subtle interactions among whites that contribute to racial problems. If there is a black person in the unit, whites “check in” with the black person whenever an incident arises because they doubt their own ability to interpret the situation. Though whites are more aware of racism, they feel less competent to handle racially volatile situations. Blacks who leave diversity training are often exhausted and frustrated. If they are the only black person in their unit, they know they cannot continue to tell personal stories or to comment on each racially-charged incident. If they return to a predominately black work unit, they, like whites, realize that they have little guidance about how to handle the strains among their peers that fuel inter-group tensions.

In order to minimize these problems, new training approaches might add interventions that provide whites with the opportunity to discuss their race and blacks with the opportunity to discuss their internal dynamics centered around class, education, etc.

\textsuperscript{57} See Anne S. Tsui et al., Being Different: Relational Demography and Organizational Attachment, 37 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 549, 556, 571 (1992).

\textsuperscript{58} See id. at 572.

\textsuperscript{59} See id.

\textsuperscript{60} See id.
IV. CONCLUSION

Racial dynamics in organizations have been resistant to change, in part because we have yet to conceptualize them and understand them fully. The challenges of operating in a changing, diverse, and highly competitive environment in which people are increasingly sophisticated in their knowledge of race relations pushes those who are interested in organizational behavior to expand their frameworks for understanding race in contemporary organizations. Reliance on solely the adversarial frame distorts our understanding of race relations by masking intra-group dissension and over-emphasizing inter-group conflict. Both intra-group and inter-group origins of inter-group conflict must be considered if we are to untangle the complicated patterns of behavior.

The alliance-based inter-group frame may call for a new language and framework for understanding the ways in which whites who act in racially progressive ways are sanctioned by their peers. Can a white person bring a racial discrimination suit against other whites (rather than a reverse discrimination suit, which adheres to the adversarial assumption)? What recourse does a white person have if she is located in a system which asserts meritocracy, acts accordingly, perhaps by promoting a black person, and is then sanctioned by other whites? Similarly, how do we describe the actions of blacks who block the progress of other blacks? Such behavior violates the intent of diversity initiatives and affirmative action; yet how will such blacks be held accountable? Will they be considered perpetrators?\textsuperscript{61} Hopefully, researchers and practitioners will be willing to investigate and debate these types of questions in the future.

This essay presented ideas about adversarial and alliance-based relationships without making assertions about which type of relationship occurs most frequently. In fact, the picture is a dynamic one. At times, adversarial inter-group forces may be in the foreground; at other times, alliance-based inter-group forces are in the foreground. The attempt to broaden our view of black-white relations from one resting primarily on adversarial inter-group assumptions to one that acknowledges and explores both the competitive and cooperative aspects of black-white relationships gives us a richer and more accurate picture of the web of interactions in contemporary American organizations. It may also provoke thought and discussion about the nature of other relationships, such as those between men and women or those between management and labor, which are

\textsuperscript{61} See Hicks v. St. Mary's Honor Ctr., 756 F. Supp. 1244, 1252 (E.D. Mo. 1991) (holding that black plaintiff had not proven racial discrimination, in part because the allegedly pretextual violations for which plaintiff had been discharged had been reviewed by defendant's disciplinary committee, which was fifty percent black), \textit{rev'd}, 90 F.2d 487 (8th Cir. 1992), \textit{rev'd}, 509 U.S. 502 (1993).
viewed and interpreted through the adversarial frame.