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LEADER AUTHENTICITY MARKERS

FINDINGS FROM A STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEADERS

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Authenticity has become a central concept in leadership studies, but the question of how followers assess the authenticity of their political leaders has not been addressed. With few exceptions, the literature on authenticity and leadership focuses on normative arguments rather than empirical study, and on the leader rather than on his or her followers. Normative models of leadership advise leaders to "be authentic." Yet leadership is a social process. As leaders struggle to be authentic, followers make decisions about the degree to which they believe their leaders are authentic. In this study we develop the scholarship on authenticity and leadership by introducing and applying what we call leader authenticity markers. These are features and actions that others use to determine the degree to which they believe a leader is authentic or inauthentic. We present findings from an exploratory study of authenticity markers of African-American political leaders.

Political leadership of ethnic minority groups is a particularly important realm in which to study leader authenticity and leader authenticity markers. We report and discuss the seven authenticity markers identified in the research and five themes about authenticity markers. The implications of these findings for leadership studies and practice are discussed, as are directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership models are increasingly focusing on the concept of authenticity, but the discussion has so far been one-sided. Normative models of leadership increasingly advise leaders to "be authentic" and there is related discussion of how to do so. Yet leaders only exist in relation to followers. As a practical matter, then, a leader's authenticity is as much a matter of perception by others as of his or her own thoughts and actions.

Numerous definitions of "authenticity" have been suggested in the literature; to date, none has proven definitive. If there is no certainty amongst researchers about what exactly "leader authenticity" is, neither is there certainty among ordinary people—voters, for example. Hence, authenticity is not something with which leaders alone must grapple. Followers, too, grapple with questions about authenticity, specifically, about the authenticity, or inauthenticity, of their leaders. For each individual leader struggling to be authentic, many more followers are looking on and evaluating, by a mix of commonly accepted and idiosyncratic criteria, the degree to which he or she appears authentic or inauthentic.

These evaluations are themselves problematic. It is well established by research, and well known through everyday experience, that interior states are not always readily readable to observers. For example, certain cues are commonly employed in perception to infer whether another is being deceptive (e.g. Kraut & Poe, 1987), yet people are notoriously inaccurate in those perceptions (Kraut & Poe, 1987; Kohnken, 1987). In fact, evidence suggests that the more confident one is in his or her judgment of another's deception, the more likely one is to be wrong (Kohnken, 1987).

Yet the research on authenticity has not, to date, examined leader authenticity from the perspective of followers. Because the authenticity literature relies predominantly, if not exclusively, on normative arguments, we know little from empirical perspectives about the perceptions of leader authenticity among followers. In particular, what cues or markers are used by followers to determine whether a leader is, in fact, authentic?

In this study, we examine authenticity and leadership by studying the authenticity markers of African-American political leaders. We advance the scholarship on leadership, authenticity, and minority communities by (a) contributing an empirical perspective on authenticity, (b) studying leader authenticity from the perspective of the followers rather than the leaders, and (c) expanding what is known about political leadership in the African-American community by studying authenticity in that community's political leadership.

We do not advance our own definition of authenticity. Rather, we let the definition float, as it were, by taking an empirical approach, observing and recording how a variety of individuals determine the presence or absence, and evaluate the quality, of whatever it is each of them means by "authenticity."

Authenticity and Leadership

Authenticity is commonly addressed in normative discussions of "good leadership" (e.g. Jaworski, 1996). Indeed, some have gone so far as to argue that authenticity is the central organizing principle of leadership (Terry, 1993). The notion of the authentic leader is surfacing in discussions of leadership in diverse settings, including leadership in business (Argyris, 1982; George, 2003), religious institutions (Pembroke, 2002), rebellions (Nadeua, 2002), the nursing profession (Swanson, 2000; Marcus & Liberto, 2003), and the military (Gayvert, 1999). Education, in particular, is a domain in which the authenticity of leaders and authentic leadership is commonly discussed (e.g. Villani, 1999; Evans, 1996; Thompson, 2003; Fernandez & Hogan, 2002; Begley, 2001; Sweetland, 2001; Yerkes & Guaglianone,

1998). Authentic leadership is even being used as a lens through which to understand historical events and historical transitions (e.g. Ramsey, 1999; Young, 2001), current events (Borger, 2001), and current political leaders (Kramer, 1995; Hays, 1999; Ezrahi, 1988; Luckowski & Lopach, 2000). Leadership development programs are similarly focusing on the "authentic leader" (Holmes, 2004; Anderson & Terry, 1996).

Unfortunately, the construct of the authentic leader has yet to be rationalized.[1] The types of leadership described as "authentic" are as varied as the settings in which this descriptor is used. What is meant by authentic leadership is not clear, and the constructs are not always clearly articulated. This may be, in part, because there has not yet been a reconciliation of some internal inconsistencies in arguments about authenticity in social settings in general, and leadership in particular (Pittinsky, 2004).

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Leader Authenticity Markers

Authenticity is not only something individuals, including individual leaders, must achieve. It is something about which others must make assessments. By focusing only on the leader's need to be authentic and his or her attempts to be authentic, we lose sight of the follower's need to assess the authenticity (or inauthenticity) of various leaders and his or her methods of doing so. Burns (1978), in an early use of the currently popular phrase "authentic leadership" recognized the need to locate authenticity in leadership processes rather than in leaders: "Authentic leadership is a collective process, I contend, and it emerges from the clash and congruence of motives and goals of leaders and followers."

In this study, we coin the term *leader authenticity markers* to refer to those features and actions of an individual leader that lead others to conclude that she or he is authentic.

African-American Political Leadership

Judgments of authenticity are particularly interesting and important in the context of ethnic groups. There is much debate about what is an authentic African American, an authentic Latino, or an authentic Asian-American (e.g. Cohen, 1999). Scientific study of the social self has demonstrated that every individual has multiple identities, including private identities and those shared identities commonly referred to as social identities. Understanding an individual as authentic requires understanding authenticity not only along private identities, but also along social identities. Ethnic identity is one of the most important social identities. In this study, we consider ethnicity authenticity markers used by the generation of African Americans born between 1965 and 1980, often referred to as the hip-hop generation.

Like its mainstream counterpart, Generation X, the hip-hop generation is often defined and discussed simply in terms of popular culture trends. Nonetheless, it has been shaped by a variety of important social, economic, cultural, and political reorganizations affecting inner city life and the African-American community more generally (Kitwana, 2002).[2] Key experiences of this generation of African Americans include school integration, inner-city isolation spurred by deindustrialization and global corporate reorganization (Kitwana, 2002), the expansion and increasing complexity of the African-American middle class (Patillo-McCoy, 1999), and the "Blackening" of poverty and crime—most notably through the "underclass" debate of the 1980s and 1990s (O'Connor, 2001).

The challenge of authenticity in the hip-hop generation is summarized in the popular slogan "Keep it real." More than a mere refrain of hip-hop music and slang, "Keep it real" captures the challenges of African-

American identity formation in the postsegregation era. For example, while the state of African-American health and wealth remains disturbingly below that of white Americans, the postsegregation African-American community participates in the American mainstream more fully and in more different capacities than any previous generation of African Americans. We need not lament the loss of the unjustly limited scope of African-American experience in the segregation era to recognize that the diversification of the African-American experience in the hip-hop generation fuels questions of authenticity in general and the authenticity of African-American leaders in particular.

"Far from being merely an academic distinction, then, questions of the authenticity of current and aspiring African-American political leaders are vital concerns for African-American politics."

Moreover, while the formal Jim Crow apparatus has been defeated, race continues to characterize substantial gaps in access and opportunity. Navigating this deceptive reality requires African Americans to operate in many environments, some more accommodating than others. The quest for authenticity, therefore, in part reflects the struggle to juggle competing demands on identity.

Finally, while the presence of persistent racism continues to define life for African Americans, the postsegregation period has witnessed a heightened focus on cleavages in African-American society in general and African-American politics in particular (Dawson, 2001; Cohen, 1999). This makes questions of authenticity particularly salient for this community.

Far from being merely an academic distinction, then, questions of the authenticity of current and aspiring African-American political leaders are vital concerns for African-American politics.

The study of authenticity in the hip-hop generation in particular is critical because this cohort is a growing voting bloc whose political values are less known than those of African Americans raised in the civil-rights era (Dawson, 2001; Kitwana, 2002). Nor is enough known about how increased access to and participation in the mainstream has affected the political consciousness of this African-American generation.

The question of what constitutes African-American authenticity has long been a contested issue in the African-American community. Toni Morrison ignited a firestorm of controversy and confusion when she dubbed William Jefferson Clinton "our first Black president. Blacker than any actual Black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime" (Morrison, 1998). "Clinton displays almost every trope of Blackness," she continued, "single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas." Morrison's comments commanded such attention and controversy, not only because she was identifying a white man—the president, no less—as African American, but also because of the problematic and stereotypical characteristics upon which she was basing Clinton's "Blackness." These were her markers for African-American authenticity.

Recent scholarship adds to the confusion by challenging the homogeneity of African-American society, not only in contemporary times but throughout its history (Kelly, 1994; Cohen, 1999; Dawson, 2001). Undoubtedly, there are common experiences that are felt strongly among a majority of African Americans (Dawson, 1995), such as the second-class citizenship that America's racialized capitalist democracy has historically imposed on them (Dawson, 1995). The very processes of debate and disagreement concerning such issues are part of a unique and shared African-American experience. If the nature of African-American authenticity is controversial, even more controversial may be what constitutes an authentic African-American political leader. But the political process does not wait for com-

munities to resolve such deep-rooted questions. Every day, political leaders seek advancement, communities seek representation, and individuals make judgments about which leaders are authentic. Thus there is a need for the study of authenticity markers, the features and actions those individuals will use to make those judgments.

Indeed, several recent elections appear to have hinged on shifting and conflicting conceptions of who is and who is not authentically African American. In the 2001 Newark, New Jersey, mayoral race, a civil-rights generation incumbent, Sharpe James, deliberately challenged his young, middle-class, Ivy League–educated opponent, Cory Booker, by publicly saying: "You have to learn to be an African American, and we don't have time to train you all night" (Hubbard, 2002). In the 2001 Birmingham, Alabama, congressional race between incumbent Earl Hilliard and a younger challenger, Artur Davis, the Reverend Al Sharpton, in support of Hilliard, warned a crowd at a rally:

> *"Everybody your color ain't your kind" (Boyer, 2002). Like James, Hilliard represented what might be termed the "civil rights old guard," African-American leaders trained in the crucible of the civil-rights movement. Davis, in contrast, was an Ivy League–educated, middle-class, conservative Democrat who attracted considerable white support.*

Conflicts about African-American authenticity are not limited to the electoral arena. In September 2002, Harry Belafonte labeled Secretary of State Colin Powell a "house Negro" (Holmes, 2002), challenging his legitimacy and authenticity as an African-American man and an appropriate African-American public leader.

These challenges all rest on contested authenticity: who constitutes an authentically African-American political leader? Interestingly, the discussion does not concern how authentic or inauthentic these leaders personally feel, but how authentic or inauthentic they are perceived to be by others. They may feel authentic while being perceived as inauthentic; they may even feel inauthentic while being perceived as authentic.

Of course, any notion of authentic African-American leadership hinges on notions of what is authentically African American, perhaps an undefinable quality except in its normative form. Yet the debate over who is or is not an authentic African-American political leader will take place whether or not there is such a thing as an authentic African-American leader. Indeed, the lack of consensus on what constitutes African-American authenticity will *increase* the debate over who is an authentic leader.

The Present Study

This research study answers two questions:

1. What markers do African Americans of the hip-hop generation use to evaluate an African-American leader's authenticity?
2. What themes emerge from the data on what markers are used, how, and by whom?

This is the first study to address authenticity markers of political leaders in general, and authenticity markers in an ethnic minority community in particular. As such, the appropriate methodology was an exploratory one. The study is designed to surface the contours of the phenomenon, for example, by unearthing the range of markers considered rather than attempting the detailed analysis of particular markers or the precise determination of their relative emphasis.

METHODS

Sample

A gender-balanced, socioeconomically and geographically diverse cohort of African Americans of the hip-hop generation (n=28) was run in a set of focus groups (n=6) during April and May of 2003. To ensure geographical diversity, two focus groups were held in each of three major cities with large and active African-American communities: Atlanta, Boston, and New York City. All participants fit the generational criterion, ranging in age from 23 to 38, the mean being 29. Forty-three percent were male; 57% female. Participants were recruited to include three levels of socioeconomic status (SES), defined by occupation and education: lower SES (occupations included clerical, janitorial, and low-level retail; educational achievement included high school), middle SES (occupations included graduate student, teacher, managerial, medium- and high-level retail and service professions, and trained professional in service industries; educational achievement included associates or four-year college degree), and high SES (occupations included consultant, lawyer, and banker; educational achievement included one or more graduate degree).

The sample was selected to meet the goals of the research: to identify potential markers of authenticity rather than to test the relative prevalence of any one marker.

Procedure

The focus groups were presented to participants as being about African-American politics and preferences. The groups were separated by SES (three low-SES groups, three middle-SES groups, and two upper-SES groups) to enable exploratory comparisons across SES groups. Participants were not explicitly made aware of the SES groupings; debriefing revealed that the intentional SES groupings for research purposes was not surmised.

Participants were offered a hot lunch or dinner, partly as compensation, but also to capitalize on the bonds of eating together that have traditionally bound the African-American family and community, serving as an ice breaker and fostering familiarity.

The focus groups were conducted by a 28-year-old African-American male. All group sessions were audiotaped and the responses were later transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Instrument

Each focus group was asked the same set of questions, organized into (a) a section asking participants their thoughts and feelings about authenticity of African-American political leaders in general terms and (b) a section inviting participants to discuss authenticity in the context of particular African-American leaders. This mix provided us with both general insights and grounded insights.

In the first set of questions, a general discussion of authenticity, five primary questions were asked: "What are African-American interests?"; "What makes an African-American leader authentic?"; "What makes an African-American leader inauthentic?"; "Is there an issue that would turn you against an African-American political candidate?"; and "Which leaders are real, and what makes them that way?"

The second set of questions invited participants to discuss the authenticity of five African-American political leaders: Colin Powell, Jesse Jackson, the Reverend Al Sharpton, Condoleezza Rice, and Louis Farrakhan. Participants were asked to comment on the authenticity of each leader, and to specify why

they judged each one the way they did. In several groups, participants chose to discuss other examples as well, most frequently Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Data Analysis

The study data were analyzed according to a categorization and theme analysis methodology derived from Miles & Huberman (1984). This methodology involves a progression from the initial reading of the transcripts, in which the researchers identified the first-order (informant) terms and concepts, to subsequent stages of cyclical comparisons in which the researchers discerned shared concepts. This occurred through the triangulation on shared concepts from comparative data, gathered from different informants at different times.

" It was commonly felt to be a given that African-American political leaders should be able to relate to the experience of resisting racism in order to be perceived as authentic."

Data points—sections of each transcript—were initially identified and coded as referring to a particular type of authenticity marker or to a more general theme. The themes served as the beginning codes for subsequent, more refined categorizing and sorting of the qualitative data. In several cases, a data point was coded as informing multiple concepts. The data was then organized in a spreadsheet. A row was used for each data point identified and analyzed. Columns were used to code the data points. Over the course of research, as themes were refined, more detailed sets of codes were developed. For each new code developed, a new column was added and the pertinent data points were recoded to reflect the increasing refinement of the study's themes and findings. As the codes used to analyze the data became more refined, the data could be reviewed at different levels of abstraction. The use of a spreadsheet enabled the researchers to sort and examine the data along several key dimensions.

In addition to the analysis described above, the researchers conducted a "gestalt" or impressionist analysis to gain a general sense of the patterns in the data (see, for example, Van Maanen, 1988). They then assessed the degree of convergence between the results produced through the two techniques to establish confidence in the findings.

In this approach, the theoretical perspective is grounded in the data and emerges from it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984). This is a particularly good methodological fit with the research questions, since empirical and theoretical work on leader authenticity markers has not previously been done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was designed to unearth a range of authenticity markers used rather than to rank their importance. Seven leader authenticity markers are presented and discussed: experience of racism, policy positions, liberal party affiliation, stereotypical speech patterns and mannerisms, experience of struggle, participation in the Black Church, and connection to historical African-American events and to other African Americans. In addition to the markers, five themes about the authenticity markers emerged. They are discussed after the markers.

Experience of racism as an authenticity marker

Participants in all the focus groups recognized the centrality of experiences with racism to the African-American identity. It was commonly felt to be a given that African-American political leaders should be able to relate to the experience of resisting racism in order to be perceived as authentic. In the rare

instance that an African-American political leader might lack personal experience of racism, a consciousness of the collective experience with racism, both in historic and present-day terms, was taken for granted as necessary.

Policy positions as authenticity markers

In all focus groups, participants frequently referenced a set of policy issues and topics that have been traditionally related to African-American politics, casting them as authentic issues for an African-American political leader. These issues were: racial equality, affirmative action, poverty and educational progress, economic development, and community building. Family-related issues (such as teen pregnancy and divorce) and health care were also cited, but far less frequently. When pressed for the single most important policy issue for an authentic African-American leader to champion, participants across socioeconomic groups cited economic issues. Economic development and political advancement were consistently seen as closely connected, the latter inherently leading to the former.

One participant, Jamal, discussed the intertwined nature of economic and political development and the need for political leaders who understand the intersection, a view expressed by many in the groups:

> *I think now we are at a point where we cannot rely on the legal system to move us forward as a people and we need to start thinking about how we move ourselves forward....One of the keys to that is through economic empowerment and freedom and gaining access to the political structure through becoming more involved in the economic structure of this country.*

It is worth noting that, despite the diversity of SES groups, only one participant offered what might be termed a radical policy option: large-scale wealth redistribution. Kiesha's comments were mild compared to traditional strands of African-American radical thought and to other theorists (Marable, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Kiesha explained:

> *I really believe that there needs to be more redistribution of funds in our country and I have a serious problem with the disparities in our country and how much the haves are able to have. That's a deal breaker for me....I'm for constraining capitalism....*

Stacy, a member of the same focus group, quickly responded to Kiesha's remarks with a view that, while not commonly voiced, was not rejected or denounced:

> *I have worked hard for the things I have and if I can afford a BMW...I'm going to buy one and if I can afford to go skiing every weekend because that's what I want to do then I am going to do it... there are people who do have that opportunity [to go to school] and do not take advantage of it and it is not my responsibility to give them what I have if they made a choice to not take advantage of that opportunity.*

In all the groups, one facet of economic development policy, affirmative action, emerged as a litmus test of sorts for authenticity in African-American leaders. One participant remarked:

> *I think that affirmative action is a big part of my evaluation of authenticity....any time you don't recognize that African-American people still struggle and that there is a fight to win in 2003 and that affirmative action is one way to win something, then I can't vote for you. You are not recognizing who you are and you are downgrading what's going on around you.*

There was also great convergence around health care as an authentic African-American issue, and poverty more generally. Poverty, however, was only sporadically raised, and policy remedies for it were inconsistently cited.

It is interesting, and perhaps problematic, that the questions of which issues are authentic and which positions on those issues are authentic became difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate. It was certainly impossible to parse them out in the responses. Authentic African-American political leaders must have more than just an idea or critique of a particular issue; they must have a plan of action.

" A political leader championing an 'authentic' issue may nevertheless be perceived as inauthentic if his or her policy recommendations do not reflect the perspective of the African-American mainstream."

Furthermore, it is not so much certain issues that are considered authentic issues, but more the case that certain policy positions in response to certain issues signal authenticity, while the failure to take those positions on those issues signals inauthenticity. A political leader championing an "authentic" issue may nevertheless be perceived as inauthentic if his or her policy recommendations do not reflect the perspective of the African-American mainstream.

Liberal party affiliation as an authenticity marker

Liberal party affiliation appears to operate as an authenticity marker for a significant subset of African Americans. For example, Arnold speaks of liberal political affiliation as more authentically African American:

> *When we hear the term conservatism, what are they conserving? They are conserving wealth. That's what conservative means, which is why when I hear Black conservative it's an oxymoron because we don't have anything to conserve. We don't maintain any wealth on a community level. When I hear Black conservative, off the top of my head I am thinking "self serving"—he's rich so he's trying to conserve himself.*

No participant acknowledged conservatism as a marker of African-American authenticity, even though Black conservatism is recognized as a marginal yet constant strand in African-American political thought (Dawson, 2000) and despite the fact that some of the most accomplished African-American political leaders have been conservatives.

Stereotypical speech patterns and mannerisms as authenticity markers

Participants considered mannerisms and speech to be markers of the authenticity or inauthenticity of African-American political leaders. For example, when asked, "How do African-American political leaders demonstrate a connection [to the African-American community]," Rodney quickly replied:

> *One of the things we haven't talked about is charisma. That is one of the biggest things we look for. If someone is awkward when they talk, we write them off. When you look at older African-American leaders they are very charismatic—they are like preachers.*

The discussion continued to focus on the ways that specific speech patterns, mannerisms, and grooming can mark an authentic African-American leader. It was interesting that most participants referred to these characteristics as markers that other people read as markers of authenticity, rather than claiming to use

them as markers themselves. One might ask whether they felt they knew what others were thinking, or said so as a substitute for acknowledging what they themselves were thinking.

Markers could signal authenticity to some participants while signaling inauthenticity to others. For example, some participants saw a "traditionally Black" speech pattern as signaling authenticity, while others saw it as a marker of inauthenticity:

> *For me, I am turned off by Black politicians who rhyme and dime—to me that's saying that if I don't rhyme it, you can't understand it or that I have to make it sing-songy to have Black people understand it...that turns me off immediately. To me it sends a message to the general politician. I feel like we're already stereotyped in that manner—you know, shucking and jiving—and that that's all we know how to do...I feel like that feeds the stereotype.*

For this participant, the public use of Black English conjures up insecurities and self-conscious feelings rooted in the traditional stereotypes of African-American culture. Black English (as opposed to Black street slang) has long been recognized as a legitimate and linguistically specific vernacular (Rickford, 2000). But in the wake of the Ebonics controversy of the mid-1990s, it seems that Black English continues to be of questionable legitimacy among the hip-hop generation, arguably the generation most responsible for the vernacular's widespread exposure. Despite such misgivings about Black English, all of the focus groups used it, not only in their casual discussions before and after the sessions, but in their formal responses to questions.[3]

Hip-hop culture, in particular, has exploded the boundaries between public and private speech, using mass media to expose the fractional character of African-American society. Therefore it is remarkable that African Americans of the hip-hop generation are still very aware and conscious of the public/private nature of African-American culture and speech. Juxtaposing the use of Black English in the focus groups with the participants' concern that the public use of Black English reinforces historic stereotypes of African-American cultural inferiority reveals a nuance of African-American political authenticity. The authenticity of Black English was validated through its casual use, yet recognized as a negative and potentially inauthentic trait for African Americans in mainstream or white space.

Experience of struggle as an authenticity marker

It was clear from the focus group discussions that an identification with struggle—loosely defined yet almost synonymous with racism—is an authenticity marker. Even participants who did not explicitly discuss experiences of struggle as an authenticity marker sometimes referenced it implicitly by virtue of the scenarios they described. Yet this was also seen as problematic by an upper-middle-class participant:

> *I think we recognize what the stereotypes are [of being authentically Black] but then recognize that that is not always what's authentically African American or of the African-American experience. To define it we think that African-American people struggle. If you have a politician from a single-parent home and struggled we immediately say, "that's real." As opposed to someone who grew up in a privileged background—we immediately separate that from the African-American experience.*

This comment reveals that the postsegregation generation, like their parents, still feel a sense of linked fate within African-American society based on the foundational realities of living in a racialized society (Dawson, 1995).

Participation in the Black Church as an authenticity marker

Many participants viewed participation in what is known as the Black Church as a marker of authenticity of African-American leaders. As Eric remarked: "I think [authenticity is]... going into the Black churches and sitting with the Black congregation." In fact, African-American religious participation is spread across different religions and not at all restricted to the "Black Church" (Taylor et al., 1996).[4] Yet participation in any religious group other than the traditional Black Church does not seem to signal an authentic African-American politician, particularly among young people.

Connection to historical African-American events and to other African Americans as authenticity markers

It was clear that African-American political leaders must not only be connected to events or periods of great importance, but must openly embrace them, in order to be perceived as authentic. The importance of claiming a stake in the African-American historical experience could be seen clearly in the way participants felt about National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's somewhat surprising failure to do so. Rice grew up in Birmingham during the civil-rights era, amidst a struggle that became a globally recognized benchmark for all social movements and a defining point in African-American history. Yet she appears to many to have been unaffected by it at the time.

One respondent remarked:

> *I have to give her credit for the position that she holds, but to look at where she comes from I don't think she is a very good role model. She grew up in the heart of the civil rights movement in Birmingham; I think two or three blocks away from where the church bombing took place. To hear her story about her mother teaching her [the] Classics instead of having her out there marching and being able to identify....I'm not saying you have to be front and center, but I wouldn't report that.... I am not proud to know that she lived in the heart of the civil rights movement where a very significant act took place and what is highlighted about her is that she was in the house learning the piano, the Classics, and learning to speak Russian.*

Another in the same group remarked:

> *She [Rice] comes from Birmingham during the civil rights movement. I know she was sheltered, but she never talks about it. That had to affect her. It's some things that happen to all Black people growing up in this country. I don't get that from her.*

It was generally felt that Rice was isolated—either by her own doing or that of her family—and her perceived distance from these events made her seem inauthentic.

Connectedness to other African Americans also operates as an authenticity marker. Condoleezza Rice was again mentioned by several participants as an illustrative example because she did not attach herself to traditional networks and paths to power used by other African-American leaders.

This desire for connection is considered important not only at the macro level of which networks one joins or where one's power come from, but also at a micro level, in everyday interactions. Alan offered an example:

> *If you walk past Black people and you are with a group of white people, you acknowledge them. I know if I am in a room full of white people and there are a few Black people in the room I guarantee that we will speak.*

The other members of Alan's group agreed.

Interestingly, connectedness is read not only in past experience and present behaviors, but also in visions for the future. As one participant explained: "A person has to be one who knows where they have truly come from, what they want to do, and where they want to go with the people, not without the people."

THEMES

In the analyses, the data were examined for the leader authenticity markers described above and for themes in how perceived authenticity is constructed. Five themes emerged:

Shared traits are sometimes perceived as distinctly African American.

Researchers have noted a curious paradox of group identity in general, and group identity as perceived authenticity in particular: perceived distinctiveness (Pittinsky, 2004). Some of the traits and features that members of a group perceive to be distinct are actually shared. For example, most ethnic groups in the United States will report family ties as a particular emphasis of their group. The apparent commonness of the distinctive trait suggests that its distinctiveness is one of perception, rather than fact.

In this study, health care was often acknowledged to be an "authentic" African-American issue, very important to the African-American community. Yet heath care is very much a mainstream issue, seen by many American voters as the most important issue political leaders should be addressing. It is therefore quite possible that other markers signaling the authenticity of African-American leaders may not, in fact, differentiate African Americans and their leaders from other groups, but may in fact be shared.

Inauthenticity is detected more clearly than authenticity.

Interestingly, although the participants began with the question of what makes someone authentic, they were far more comfortable discussing inauthenticity. One participant, when asked "What makes an authentic African-American political leader?" noted the tendency in himself, and the others in the group, to default back to the other end of the continuum, inauthenticity: "I keep thinking in the negative...the first thing inauthentic that comes to my mind is Jesse Jackson." It appears that followers are more certain what constitutes a breach of authenticity than what constitutes positive expression of authenticity. Perhaps this finding reflects an openness to various forms of identity and expression within African-American society, but within certain bounds. For example, claiming and owning the African-American identity, being aware of and resisting negative stereotypes of African-American identity, and recognizing the protracted struggle of African-American life may be non-negotiable authenticity traits, beyond which considerable departures are allowed.

Perceived authenticity is problematic for political figures.

The American public holds many cynical views of political leaders' power motives, making it difficult for followers to view political leaders as truly authentic. This general cynicism appears to extend to African Americans. One respondent's feelings about Jesse Jackson reveal this problem well:[5]

> *I still respect Jesse for things he's done—I don't really know what he's done or specific proposals he has, but he always seems to show his face anytime there is a camera around, and that bugs me. It shows his cause is not steadfast; it's wavering with the times. He's not stead-*

fast as to what he thinks African-American people need. He keeps injecting himself into situations and I don't like that.

Another participant in another group voiced similar sentiments and critiqued Jackson as a political careerist:

It's a good and bad thing because of how he exploits us sometimes, but there's just not many people left who will do that. He just seems to show up sometimes when people don't recognize.

Leaders can signal too much authenticity.

Being perceived as authentic appears, in general, to be a desirable trait that followers seek in leaders. However, the markers through which followers read authenticity in this study were not linearly related to authenticity, but curvilinearly related. So while there were risks to showing too few authenticity markers, there also seemed to be counterproductive effects of showing too many and being perceived as forced. artificial, or contrived. Ultimately it brought participants right back to a place of perceived inauthenticity.

"While there were risks to showing too few authenticity markers, there also seemed to be counterproductive effects of showing too many and being perceived as forced."

For example, while acknowledging a connection to African-American people and the African-American experience was a significant authenticity marker for many of the respondents, many also perceived trying too hard to connect with African-American people as suspicious and even inauthentic. In the course of a conversation in which the many ways Reverend Al Sharpton connects with the African-American community were being discussed, one respondent remarked:

Al Sharpton is trying to go for the presidency ... I think it is a matter of image. I don't see trueness with Al Sharpton. I don't see a Martin Luther King type of [spirituality]... not saying that everybody has to be the same, but I don't feel that. I don't feel a Malcolm X image coming from the brother. I feel I am going to go out here and try to be the first Black candidate.

Here, in contrast to the perceptions expressed about Condoleezza Rice, over-identification rather than under-identification seemed to be a marker of inauthenticity. African-American leaders have a balance to strike, identifying strongly enough to be perceived as authentic, but not overidentifying at the risk of being perceived as opportunistic and exploitative of the mass-mobilizing power of African-American politics.

There is agreement on leader authenticity markers despite commonly referenced divisions in African-American society.

One of the most striking themes in the data was the consensus across the different socioeconomic status groups on what is perceived as authenticity in political leaders, despite presentations in the media and recent trends in African-American scholarship focusing on cleavages in African-American life. The consensus observable in this study raises the question of whether the cleavages in contemporary African-American life have been overestimated or leader authenticity markers happen to be a subject of agreement across these chasms. It appears that whatever barriers might arise in response to economic class differences in the African-American community are not as prominent, or as potent, as the feelings of linked fate due to race. Indeed, there was the commonly shared view across SES groups that race is still a significant determinant of opportunity in America.[6]

CONCLUSION

Leadership studies have discovered authenticity. Being authentic is a particularly difficult task for an African-American leader in the postsegregation generation, as the boundaries of African-American experience are expanding (Cohen, 1999). It is also an overlooked challenge for followers, who must evaluate the authenticity of their leaders. In this study we examined what markers followers use to decide the authenticity, or inauthenticity, of their leaders. We then examined several themes in the application of these authenticity markers.

As our research was deliberately qualitative, seeking to uncover important markers rather than to rank, quantify, or compare them analytically, a logical next step would be to take a quantitative approach to the same phenomena.

The work reported here also suggests a fruitful line of research: exploring which leader authenticity markers are used by majority group members, and other minority group members (e.g. Latino and Asian-Americans), in their perceptions of African-American political leaders. More generally, how do members of one group perceive the authenticity of leaders of another group? Such research should extend beyond the study of ethnic groups to ask, who will be perceived as an authentic labor leader or an authentic proponent of women's rights? The present research, which treats authenticity as an important variable in understanding the relationship between leaders and followers, rather than as something that unfolds within the leader, can be coupled with the viewpoint of intergroup relations to give us a provocative new lens for understanding politics and leadership in pluralistic settings.

Another arena for future work is the role of authenticity in driving political behavior such as voting. Research has already uncovered a set of psychological assessments that, along with policy positions, influence voting behavior. As authenticity is increasingly discussed as something normatively desirable for leaders, empirical research should examine the importance of authenticity to voting. Data collected in this study suggest that perceptions of a candidate's authenticity are very important to espoused voting behavior.

The finding that participants were more comfortable discussing inauthenticity than authenticity suggested the possibility that African-American society is open to various forms of identity, but within certain bounds, with the result that inauthenticity is more clearly defined and easier to detect than authenticity. Future research might try to determine whether that is the case and, if so, the range and bounds of that openness.

Researchers into leader authenticity markers will naturally wonder whether their work, should it reach a state of sufficient richness and rigor, might be absorbed into the market research methodology that seems to guide so many efforts in contemporary society. But beyond the possibility of potential exploitation of those authenticity markers that are already in use, it may be further possible for leaders to deliberately introduce new authenticity markers into society. For example, Croats and Serbs speak a common language known as Serbo-Croatian. With the breakup of Yugoslavia, nationalist leaders in the two independent and deeply hostile nations, Serbia and Croatia, each now claim to have their own languages, Serbian and Croatian. Thus, two languages that, for all practical purposes, don't even exist have now been crafted and constructed as symbols of national authenticity.

Even more downstream, but with a much wider range of potential application, researchers should eventually be able to combine the results of authenticity studies in a wide range of contexts to seek more general patterns of authenticity perception. Are there general categories of authenticity markers

that would obtain whether people are judging the authenticity of political leaders or musicians, business managers, or poets?

The applications of these advances in the study of authenticity within leadership studies will be great. People will always be searching for authentic leaders. As we learn more about how authenticity operates, we will learn more about who can bridge gaps and be seen as credible and trustworthy political representatives of groups and communities, particularly ethnic minority communities. Furthermore, the study of leader authenticity markers enhances our understanding of important beliefs and behaviors that political leaders seek to inspire and which authenticity helps foster. Perceived authenticity, for example, is a critical factor in generating and sustaining trust in leaders (Bennis, 1999).

This study, by taking an empirical rather than a normative approach, offers the first steps towards an understanding of leader authenticity as a process of perception.

ENDNOTES

1 Chris Argyris' work on authenticity may offer the most systematic approach to date. Argyris has reported on over four decades of research on business organizations, examining how they systematically foster modes of communication that defeat authenticity. In Argyris' terminology, the difference between "what I say" and "what I mean" is the measure of authenticity (e.g. Argyris, 1982).

2 Influential hip-hop generation thinkers and activists include Bakari Kitwana (2002), Kevin Powell (1997), and Joan Morgan (1999).

3 For a more in-depth discussion of the linguistic and cultural foundations of Black English, see *Spoken soul* (Rickford & Rockford, 2000).

4 The Black Church in the African-American experience usually refers to seven major historic Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). More recently developed denominations include the National Missionary Baptist Convention (NMBC) and the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (FGBCF), although the FGBCF does not refer to itself as a denomination.

However, significant numbers of African Americans were and are members of predominantly white denominations such as the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, United Methodist, and Roman Catholic churches. Outside Christianity, there are African-American Muslims (Turner, 2003). Statistics on ethnicity and religion are hard to find; the United States government does not collect them and individual religious groups and denominations vary in their ability and willingness to keep track of this information. It does appear, however, that African-American spiritual life is far more diverse than the religious cues used to assess the authenticity of African American political leaders, particularly among young people. First, variations in religious commitment across generations play key roles in explaining transitions from sect to church, and the formation of sectarian movements.

Further, there are cohort differences in religious participation among African Americans (Sherkat, 2001). Cohort-specific shifts in religious participation across denominations demonstrate the secularization of African-American mainline Methodist and Baptist groups, and the early-stage growth of newer "nondenominational" churches alongside the traditional sectarian denominations (Sherkat, 2001). If one looks at it by ethnicity of co-congregants, rather

than denomination, a similar picture emerges. Roper polling data found that 22% of African-American respondents reported that, at the church or other place of worship they attend, the people were "All White," "Mostly White," or "Half [White] and half [Black]" (Gallup, 1997). And these figures are restricted to those African Americans who report regularly attending a church or other place of worship.

Thus, while participation in a historical and generalized "Black Church" is viewed by many as a marker of authenticity of African-American leaders, this authenticity cue operates within the great religious pluralism of the African-American community. And many African-American voters are neither religiously affiliated nor regular attendees of religious organizations.

5 It is interesting to note the use of first names in discussing these figures. For example, Jackson was referred to as "Jesse" in a manner that would suggest that everyone at the table knew him personally. His authenticity was challenged and defended in emotional terms, validating that he was part of a larger community that, for better or worse, identified him as a member, an extension of their collective identity, and accountable to them whether they liked him or not.

6 This is not to overlook the diversity within the African-American community or to promote the myth of an African-American monolith, but the data collected in this study surfaced compelling evidence of commonalities rather than of cleavages.

One possible explanation for why more pronounced class differences were not observed is the transitory nature of African-American class identities. Individuals and families can travel across socioeconomic lines between and even within generations (Tyson, 2003). Additionally, the African-American middle and upper classes remain linked to the working class and the poor through shared community institutions such as churches, schools, and extended families (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). While class realities can color one's experience in a racialized society, they do not diminish the impact of that racialization.

Outside the realm of the data discussed here, the persistence of block voting, cultural practices, racialized residential patterns, and the day-to-day experiences with white supremacy (in the workplace, in schools, etc.) validate that there is much tying the African-American community together. Poll data often reveal that the perceived class and generational gap in African-American society on political issues is marginal (The 2002 National Opinion Poll of African Americans conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies).

Recent trends in African-American scholarship have focused on divisions within African-American society, not only as a means of demystifying notions of a monolithic and homogenous African-American identity, but as a way of problematizing black identity formation (Dawson, 1995; Dawson, 2002; Gregory, 1999; Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Kelley, 1994). In the political realm, however, African Americans continue to recognize the same sets of issues as important and vote mostly as a bloc.

The perceived schisms likely result from romanticized and oversimplified understandings of the civil rights era. Intraracial tensions and conflict in that period have long been ignored, making the community today look comparatively more divided than it likely is. When our focus groups discussed ideological cleavages in contemporary African-American society, the values of the hip-hop generation, and the present strength of African-American politics, countless contrasts were made to the 1960s. One respondent, for example, remarks, "Maybe during the civil rights movement there was more of a solidarity and you could pigeonhole all interests in one box. Now with the Black community being so diverse in terms of economics, social class, it's hard to say what are Black interests and what aren't."

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