



AFRICAN AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD AUTHORITY

INDIVIDUAL VS. GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY

THE HIGH SCHOOL CONSTITUTION EXAM

High School seniors often express anxiety when they learn that they have to pass a U.S. Constitution exam before they can graduate. They often blurt out when told of this requirement, "What if we don't pass?" In one such class, a white female teacher, invoking the Anglo cultural values of individual autonomy, primary individual responsibility, self reliance and self-determination, said to the class, "If you [as individuals] study and apply yourself, you should have no problem passing." An African American female teacher, in another such class where this happened --invoking African American cultural values of collaborative responsibility and, as the one in charge: the one accountable for what happens and from whom the students will take their cues-- said, "I won't permit that to happen!"

Parenting is also implicated here especially in the assignment of responsibility and blame if a son or daughter did not do well at school or otherwise acted inappropriately. Within Anglo U.S. culture, the actions of a son or daughter's failure reflects primarily on them as individuals. Within other cultures (African American, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, Slavic, et.al.) the actions of a son or daughter strongly implicate the parents and are often seen as a direct result of their upbringing. As Wageh Saad, our Lebanese colleague, says citing an Arab proverb, "Where would a man, whose father is an onion and his mother a garlic, get a sweet fragrance."

Another example of how the actions of one individual morally implicate others -in this instance the whole family - occurs in the film, Bend it like Beckham. An Asian Indian family broke off the engagement of their son to the other family's older daughter, because the younger sister had been seen giving a hug to an ostensibly male friend in public --it was actually a female with short hair.

LAW AND ORDER: "STATE OF MIND" VS. "STATE OF THE UNION"



In one episode of the TV show *Law and Order* a white woman was charged with murdering the white wife of her ex-husband (who was black but passing as white). Together, the ex-husband and wife were trying to reclaim the visibly black child that she had given birth to that they had just given up for adoption. The motive of the defendant was that she did not want it found out that the son that she had with her ex-husband was also African American -he, too was passing as white-- to protect him from the racism that existed in the society at large and the ostracism that he would directly experience at the hands of his network of white friends if they knew this about him. The prosecution saw the defendant's action as motivated purely by racism and sought to prosecute the case as a "hate" crime. The defendant's lawyer -an African American woman—sought to bring forth witnesses from the Social Sciences that would argue that her client's actions were "not racist" but aimed at protecting her son based upon a statistical assessment of the social consequences that her son would experience if it were discovered that he were black. What applies to the cultural distinctions being made here is that the prosecution, supported by the judge, said that what was relevant was the "state of mind" of the defendant (not the "state of the union", as she put it), and since a direct link could not be made between the two, the information that the Social Scientists would supply was considered irrelevant and deemed inadmissible. African Americans, as exemplified by the African American lawyer who tried to establish a link between state of mind and state of the union, would be more likely to see the link between the two as compelling and evidentiary. In another example, Johnny Cochran, in the O.J. Simpson trial, was successful in convincing African Americans on the jury that "racism" within police departments throughout the nation generally, tainted the evidence that they supplied linking O.J. Simpson to the crime. See also the headline on the CNN O.J. Simpson Main Page website: "The pool of prospective jurors in the O.J. Simpson civil trial split along racial lines Tuesday, with whites saying Simpson was probably guilty of murder and African-Americans saying he is innocent."²⁵

In yet another example a recent court case: *Longmire v. Wyser-Pratte*, S.D.N.Y., No. 05- 6725, 9/6/07 ruled against a biracial African American plaintiff who was passing as white at work who had brought a "hostile work environment" claim against his employer "because his coworkers could not have been directing racist remarks specifically at him if they did not know that he was half black".²⁶ This ruling again shows the U.S. mainstream Anglo cultural pattern of establishing accountability with respect to intent and the underlying role that awareness plays in qualifying intent. The plaintiff case also shows how differently African Americans culturally frame and establish accountability: holding individuals



accountable for what was said and done and the impact of that. The case also addresses the different cultural views on the overall responsibilities of leadership for the actions of individual employees. U.S. Mainstream Anglo culture primarily holds individuals accountable for their actions while African American culture divides the blame between those individuals who committed the act, and the person or group in charge that, either through acts of commission or omission, created a climate that would allow that kind of behavior to occur. These different cultural perspectives on intent vs. impact, and leadership accountability around what happens, also play out in the workplace. In one such example, African Americans asked the union steward, "How come there are only blacks are on the second shift?" The union steward said, "Seniority!" Blacks then asked, "How come whites have all the seniority?" African Americans view any inconsistent treatment along racial lines as likely to have had a racial basis or bias. Typically, CWM and CWW will react to those charges of racial bias with regard to what was meant at the time that they did it. So when blacks registered a complaint to their white supervisor that, "Whites got all the good vacation time," their white supervisor said that vacation times were awarded "on a first come, first serve basis." Blacks then asked, "How come Whites knew to come in first?" It turned out upon investigation that the reason for the racially skewed that he was half black".²⁶ This ruling again shows the U.S. mainstream Anglo cultural pattern of establishing accountability with respect to intent and the underlying role that awareness plays in qualifying intent. The plaintiff case also shows how differently African Americans culturally frame and establish accountability: holding individuals accountable for what was said and done and the impact of that. The case also addresses the different cultural views on the overall responsibilities of leadership for the actions of individual employees. U.S. Mainstream Anglo culture primarily holds individuals accountable for their actions while African American culture divides the blame between those individuals who committed the act, and the person or group in charge that, either through acts of commission or omission, created a climate that would allow that kind of behavior to occur.

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they did it. So when blacks registered a complaint to their white supervisor that, “Whites got all the good vacation time,” their white supervisor said that vacation times were awarded “on a first come, first serve basis.” Blacks then asked, “How come Whites knew to come in first?” It turned out upon investigation that the reason for the racially skewed result was because the announcement to apply for vacation times was made at the first shift. Since there were only white workers on the first shift, they knew first to apply and so got the best vacation times. However, because it was not his intent to skew the distribution of vacation times to favor the white workers the white supervisor did not see himself accountable for “the way it played out.” Conversely, the black workers did not believe the white supervisor did not mean to direct the outcome to favor the white workers, because, for them, intent is inferred from what was said and done and, in part, because he should have known. Also, by not taking responsibility for what happened, the white supervisor lost whatever credibility he might have had with the black workers on that shift. As it applies to the above examples, managers and supervisors need to broaden their concept of “fairness” to consider access and outcomes, or with respect the Supreme Court decision in *Griggs vs. Duke Power*: disparate impact, not just processes that have the appearance of fairness, like, “seniority,” or “first come, first serve.” As to the above workplace example, announcing that workers could start applying for vacation times at the start of the first shift created a process that, even without intentionally promoting any particular outcome, set things up for the white workers to get the best vacation time. As such, the process was tainted even by the standards for equal access that CWM consider fair, and especially so by African American standards that also take into account parity with respect to outcomes. With respect to the earlier example of press coverage: broadening accountability to take into account the impact on others with respect to what is being said and done and not limiting accountability only to what was in the state of mind of the person who made the decision, would also be an effective way to deal with the different U.S. mainstream and African American cultural standards of accountability described above. Looking for pragmatic ways to solve the problem of equal access and outcome for diverse groups within the U.S. workplace, or within the larger society, requires that all parties go beyond the limitations that are set by looking at things only through one (their own) cultural lens.

25 Headline on the CNN O.J. Simpson Main Page website.

26 Casellas, G. F. October 16, 2007. “Biracial Employee Who Presented Himself as White Loses Race-Discrimination Case,” in DiversityInc.

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