

TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

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INTERVIEW

JULIANA: Before starting the interview, I think it is important to say why I chose this paper. I study skin tone bias and the selection of leaders, and this paper has been a great influence for me. But another interesting thing is that you did a replication study on the premises of this paper recently, considering the changes in context. **So, my idea here is to talk about what has changed since this article was published in the beginning in 2008 and now.**

ASHLEIGH: I was very curious as to how this paper was selected and what role it played in your research. I'm still extremely humbled when I hear people say that they consider our work as influential and use our findings as the basis of their research. I never get tired of hearing that! Thank you, for sharing that background with me.

JULIANA: The first question is, in the paper, you were talking about a topic that was already discussed in the literature, that is racial bias suffered by Black leaders. But you come up with a different explanation, which is the historical association of leadership with whiteness. Where did this argument come from? **Where did this idea come from?**

ASHLEIGH: Research ideas can come from a range of places and circumstances. This one started when I was a graduate student at Kellogg, and there were several separate two-person conversations with colleagues that were taking place about race, leadership, and sports teams. Those conversations led to a meeting with Geoffrey Leonardelli from University of Toronto who was a post doc at the time, the late Kathy Phillips who was an assistant professor at the time, and Leigh Thompson who was serving as one of my academic advisors. There was a lot of chatter in the media about the lack of racial diversity in the ranks of head coaches in the NFL and at the college level. The NFL had been threatened with various lawsuits for discrimination in their hiring practices. The late Johnny Cochran, of the OJ Simpson trial, actually commissioned a report on the lack of representation of Black head coaches in the NFL. The media attention and threat of lawsuits is what ultimately led to the Rooney rule which required that non-white candidates be included in hiring considerations for head coach positions in the NFL. So all of this served as the backdrop to come up with this research question – "Is there a white standard of leadership?" **Taking a phenomenon that had garnered a lot of attention in the sports arena and parlaying that into business is how the idea for the paper was generated.**

JULIANA: Wow, I could never imagine it being from sports! That is an amazing background story, really. It's something we see nowadays in every sport. Here, it's a discussion we have. I'm from Brazil and we have a lot of Black soccer players but no Black soccer coaches. It's the same issue.

ASHLEIGH: Yes! We were at a business school studying and teaching about CEOs and other industry leaders, so it seemed almost natural to compare what was taking place in sports to what may be taking place in other industries.

JULIANA: So did the initial idea change a lot until the final product?

ASHLEIGH: Yes and no. The phenomenon of interest, the white standard of leadership, remained invariable. That never changed. The theory, leadership categorization, which served as the basis for much of our arguments also never changed. Those two considerations remained steady for much of the paper. Perhaps what changed the most was the explication of the mechanism behind the phenomenon. and this took place during the review process at JAP. We had a fantastic Associate Editor at the helm and with her guidance and the reviewers' suggestions, our single study paper became a four-study paper.

The review process helped to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the origins of leadership categorization theory. The reviewers really pushed us to explain and demonstrate the "why" in our findings. Because of their prodding, I went back to Rosch's original categorization theory which preceded leadership categorization. Rosch's philosophies and ideologies were not included in the original paper. Rosch had this finite, specific conceptualization of what a prototype is and what a prototype is not. Principle one – over time, individuals learn which features are essential for members of the category. Principle two – over time, they learn which features are non-essential, are peripheral, to the category. We tested these two principles in Studies 1 and 2. In my opinion, these two studies are really the "heart" of the manuscript and typify what we mean when we reference the existence of the white leadership bias. **The review process helped change the paper for the better because it really forced us to tease apart our explanation, and to discern convincingly whether race was a characteristic of a leader prototype in business.**

JULIANA: Recently, a paper came out, reviewing what you've done and contesting the idea that there is a White standard in leadership categorization. How did you feel when you read that? What was the first impact, because they talk about changes in context, and I know that really happened. But if you look at other things, things haven't changed that much, as there aren't many Black leaders in relevant positions

ASHLEIGH: Let's just be honest, most researchers are not happy to learn that their work is being contested, but that initial reaction tends to be temporary and subsides rather quickly – at least that's what happened for me. After that primary instinct dwindled, I read their arguments objectively with an open mind. If our research no longer holds, I want to understand why and what it means. Because keep in mind, we argue that there is a white standard in leadership in business. Specifically, that being white is an expected characteristic of leaders in a business setting. If this is no longer the case, then this should be a cause for celebration as this bias that can have negative implications for many organizational members has now been eradicated, right? **If there's no longer a white standard of leadership, we should try to understand how this has transpired! The goal of most diversity research is not to merely identify and document the occurrence of disparity or bias and discrimination, but to also develop remedies for these various social inequities. So if this has occurred, then it's a cause for a deep dive into the data and the theory to understand and explain how such a transformation in the perceptions that we have of our leaders has taken place.** But, even though I was open to this possible shift in our social milieu, I was not quite so sure that celebration was warranted just yet. Although some progress has been made in

diversifying our leadership ranks, most of the assumptions upon which we based our argument still hold today, especially when it comes to who occupies top positions in many business, governmental, and political hierarchies. So I first wanted to understand the arguments being made and second, I wanted to understand the evidence provided.

We drew upon the prevailing research methods at the time to demonstrate the occurrence of our predicted phenomenon. These recent examinations, suggest, that the manner in which we test the phenomenon of interest likely needs to evolve given our current social context, given our political milieu, given our awareness of race as a social construct in business settings and in society at large.

These types of investigations, from my perspective, only help to make our work better. It forced us to reevaluate our original methods with a modern lens and to provide empirical substantiation for why our work is still relevant. Ultimately in the 2022 JAP publication, we demonstrate that the white standard of leadership does persist, so any celebration of its demise may be slightly premature, but the manner in which we detect it today is much different than the manner in which we did so in the original work.

JULIANA: And that's what I wanted to talk about. **How did you come up with a new set of experiments that are different and that have new methodologies to try to test the same hypotheses now, in which this topic is very sensitive and people are aware of what they have to answer.**

ASHLEIGH: **The willingness to acknowledge that one possesses racial bias has become less acceptable, and people are often not willing to acknowledge publicly how they may really feel because of concern for the negative repercussions that may accompany such recognition. As a result, we had to test our racial phenomenon of interest using different methodological lenses than we did before.** In the 2022 paper, we used indirect, rather than direct measures to detect racial bias. I had the privilege of working with my amazing colleague, Chris Petsko, who was a post-doc at Fuqua at the time. He is thoughtful and intellectually curious and creative and a burgeoning diversity researcher with a very bright future. Together, we came up with an indirect way to measure whether this white standard of leadership persisted.

JULIANA: So, my final question, in both of your papers, one thing that's pretty clear is that this really reflects the reality of the U.S. But racial phenomena and this thing about the white standard is not something that is exclusive to the U.S. **Do you think it would be possible to replicate these results in some other contexts, how this would play out if people were sensitive to these measures?**

ASHLEIGH: It's an empirical question. We always must let the data speak for itself. I can, however, suggest that based on some preliminary findings, the standard may hold in at least two additional countries. **My co-author and his doctoral student have studied this in at least one additional country, and I have studied it in a separate country. The results still hold.** As these results are preliminary, additional work is needed to make a more robust conclusion. The persistence of the standard is really beholden to context. It is beholden to the situation. It is beholden to the institution

and artifacts of that particular culture. But, I suspect, in numerous countries and cultures around the world, the white standard of leadership is ever present.

JULIANA: Thank you!