

Developing black leadership for systems change

Supervisors: [Dr Owain Smolović Jones](#) and [Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo](#), Department of People and Organisation, The Open University Business School

Project Description:

This project will explore how leadership is developed in black communities of learning. In doing so it will address a serious deficit in understanding of how leadership is practiced and developed. Focusing on the work of black leaders seeking to enact systemic change in organisations and society, the project aims to surface how such leadership is developed and how resistance to this leadership manifests.

The primary focus will be on enriching knowledge within leadership studies. Research on race and leadership remains in a nascent stage, despite the obvious urgency of needing to better understand their mutual dynamics. Research has focused on how race affects the perception and effects of leadership, as well as how leadership can shift perceptions of race (Ospina and Foldy, 2009). Research can illuminate the forces blocking black people from attaining senior roles but can also offer a relational and processual view of race and leadership. This latter emphasis means exploring leadership as a verb in motion, a practice held between black people as they seek to change systems, rather than only trying to attain personal success within the status quo. We are primarily interested in this focus, although we do not casually brush aside the importance of people being able to find material security in an increasingly precarious world. Focusing on leadership for systems change means acknowledging that the concept and practice of leadership comes with a problematic history – one that tends to normalise whiteness and masculinity (Foldy and Buckley, 2014; Liu, 2016). Any study of how black leadership is developed will therefore need to reckon with how and whether ‘leadership’ can be put to use to change a system that will resist profound change (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017). Here we encounter a contradiction. Namely, that ‘leadership’ can be the name under which systemic forms of racism are normalised and made real; but leadership can also be a term denoting collective action that seeks to change the status quo.

A successful proposal will need to address the literature on developing leadership. Mostly focusing on formal leadership development programmes for people in work, some studies have grappled with how leadership development is a process shot through with power relations (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). From this perspective, leadership development programmes can be forums in which participants are disciplined into accepting, and even championing, existing organisational and

social norms (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017); but they can also hold more liberating possibilities, as places of creativity where norms and taboos are broken and 'leadership' is used as a means of generating new alliances and purpose (Smolović Jones et al, 2016). However, the literature has not to date proactively concentrated on race in relation to the power of leadership development, and this needs to be corrected. In addition, it is a literature that needs to break free of the formalised leadership development programme and to explore how leadership may develop in everyday practice, as well as through formalised learning processes – although the two may be complementary.

We are open to a diverse range of theoretical ways in which applicants can address the call. We particularly welcome proposals that seek to enrich leadership studies with insight from post-colonial theory (Liu, 2021), intersectionality (Raman, 2020) or other theories relevant to the study of race in organisations and society. We are also happy to consider proposals that seek to incorporate materialist perspectives, such as theories of space (e.g. Harvey, 2019; Massey, 2005); or post-humanism (e.g. Braidotti, 2013). Interfaces between race and feminism clearly also offer considerable promise to illuminate understanding (e.g. hooks, 2014). These may be significant as they could help the project place anti-racist (and racist) practice within a larger context of economic and social relations, prompting questions such as: How does black leadership develop in relation to campaigns against gentrification or police brutality, or campaigns for climate and workplace justice? How do local and international geographies inform and shape the development of black leadership? What are the spatial, material and economic forces that sit alongside and inform black leadership that seeks change? How do individuals experience their agency in black leadership?

Applicants will adopt a qualitative methodology but we are particularly keen to consider proposals that adopt an ethnographic approach. Being embedded in a scene of study for a prolonged period of time holds great promise for better understanding how leadership develops, because it offers rich immersion in process as it unfolds (Smolović Jones et al, 2015; Sutherland, 2018). It is important to move beyond what people say about leadership in research interviews, as it is a concept that gets spoken of in shallow and clichéd terms – we need more studies that offer insight into how it is actually used in practice and the resistances it faces along the way.

As a potential scene of study, the OU is currently exploring and beginning to develop a Black Leadership Empowerment Programme. The programme, if successful, will incorporate online learning with local in-person communities of practice, which could serve as a basis for research. However, we are not fixed on this as a research context and see value in applicants proposing alternative sites of practice where impactful leadership is underway – in communities or within organisations.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Owain Smolović Jones is director of the OU's Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures academic centre of excellence and is also a senior lecturer. He is a leadership

scholar, who focuses on the political dynamics of leadership, particularly in relation to geographical space and climate change.

Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo is a Lecturer in Work Based Learning in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise. His scholarship focuses on how leaders of Black and Minority-Led Organisations engage with majority-led institutions and seek to become partners rather than tokens.

References:

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.

Carroll, B., & Nicholson, H. (2014). Resistance and struggle in leadership development. *Human Relations*, 67(11), 1413-1436.#

Foldy, E. G., & Buckley, T. R. (2014). *The color bind: Talking (and not talking) about race at work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Gagnon, S., & Collinson, D. (2014). Rethinking global leadership development programmes: The interrelated significance of power, context and identity. *Organization Studies*, 35(5), 645-670.

Gagnon, S., & Collinson, D. (2017). Resistance through difference: The co-constitution of dissent and inclusion. *Organization Studies*, 38(9), 1253-1276.

Harvey, D. (2019). *Spaces of global capitalism: A theory of uneven geographical development*. London: Verso.

hooks, b. (2014). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Liu, H., & Baker, C. (2016). White Knights: Leadership as the heroicisation of whiteness. *Leadership*, 12(4), 420-448.

Liu, H. (2021). *Redeeming leadership: An anti-racist feminist intervention*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London: Sage.

Nicholson, H., & Carroll, B. (2013). Identity undoing and power relations in leadership development. *Human relations*, 66(9), 1225-1248.

Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2009). A critical review of race and ethnicity in the leadership literature: Surfacing context, power and the collective dimensions of leadership. *The leadership quarterly*, 20(6), 876-896.

Raman, K. R. (2020). Can the Dalit woman speak? How 'intersectionality' helps advance postcolonial organization studies. *Organization*, 27(2), 272-290.

Smolović Jones, O., Grint, K., & Cammock, P. (2015). Public leadership development facilitation and the crossroads blues. *Management Learning*, 46(4), 391-411.