

## Introduction

This article was published in the *UU Voice*, then edited by Roger Cowan and published by Earl Holt, in the summer of 2000. It was widely distributed at the Nashville General Assembly.

I received two kinds of reactions to the article. The first was that many people thought it was very brave, even fool-hardy, for a new minister still in Preliminary Fellowship, to make these kinds of criticisms. To which, I would respond that I had complete faith in the integrity of the Unitarian Universalist Association and its commitment to honest and open debate and discussion. In fact, nothing adverse has ever happened to me as the result of publishing this article, although I recognize that the congregation of the First Unitarian Church of Worcester has secured my position with the call to settled ministry with them. But I point to my experience with this article to all those of my colleagues, especially the newer ones, who fear that the honest expression of their views will somehow place them in danger with the denominational authorities.

The second reaction has led to a less hopeful outcome. Numerous people who were deeply committed to the Journey to Wholeness, and all of the anti-racism efforts, approached me and said that they wished to discuss my article further with me. I invited their comments. I have been available and accessible ever since, after all, I am in the UUA directory, and have served the same church ever since. Yet, I have yet to receive one substantive response to it, or its arguments.

I never had an electronic copy of the final version of the article. I have scanned one of my last remaining copies of the issue of the Voice in which it appeared. I have refrained from changing it.

August 2006

# Anti-Racism Decoded

By TOM SCHADE

We still live in the world that was formed in the 1960s and 1970s for both good and ill. A dream was released during that time, and we could imagine a different kind of nation and world. At its most general, every kind of arbitrary distinction that thwarted a person's hopes would be overcome. We see the legacy of that era in everything from the role of women, the ongoing transformation of the society around gay sexuality, and the increased commitment to special education.

But at its most specific and particular, the overriding vision of that era was the very specific hope that white people, the children of Europe, and black people, the children of Africa, would be reconciled. That, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "the sons of slaveowners and the sons of slaves would sit down at the table of brotherhood together." Justice would make reconciliation possible.

During that era, we glimpsed the possibility that the division of race would not dominate our children's lives as it has our parents' and our own. We imagined integrated schools, integrated neighborhoods, integrated churches, integrated cities, integrated circles of friends. We imagined an America completely opposite from the real America that we knew. We would reweave the torn fabric of creation. We would live out the promise of our nation's dream. The dream that justice would lead to reconciliation was how we could see the coming of the Kingdom of God. **It** would be the day when the lion would lie down with the lamb, the crooked places made straight, and justice flowing down like a mighty stream, and all flesh shall see it together.

Unfortunately, that dream did not come true.

As it became clear over the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that the vision of the Civil Rights Movement was not coming true, a great sadness settled over the land. We became filled with feelings of shame and rage.

Most of us are aware that the antiracism campaign within the UUA is somehow connected to those days, specifically to the Black Empowerment controversy of 1968 to 1971. The March April 2000 issue of the *UU [J7t} //d* magazine highlighted some of the connections in an overview of the current situation alongside a historical review of the 1968 era.

In fact, if you look closely, you can see that the present anti-racism campaign has been designed with one overarching strategic conception: to win the battle of the Empowerment controversy. The present anti-racism campaign is a 21st century campaign to win a battle fought thirty years ago.

Thirty years ago, the Black Affairs Council (BAC) won most of its goals. They won significant funding for a whole host of projects. But at a symbolic level, they lost because they were unable to prevent the rival Black and White alliance (BAWA) from receiving *any* UUA funds. The BAC did not continue to receive full funding when the Association suffered financial problems, in part because congregations declined to send in funds for the purposes for which they had been committed.

The Black Affairs Council suffered these setbacks because they lacked sufficient committed support in the member congregations of a religious association based on congregational polity. Appropriately, the current campaign features a broad effort to train congregations, thus establishing a broader base than in the past. Parallel to the current campaign is also a persistent critique of congregational polity, starting with the Commission on Appraisal's Interdependence, Robert Bellah's 1998 address targeting individualism and the whole" fulfilling the Promise In general, congregational polity has been tagged as the institutional equivalent of an outdated individualism to be resisted and even been labeled as the UU equivalent of "states rights," a worthy sounding principle used to protect racism at the local level. This is ironic because congregational polity is one of the most communitarian methods for church governance.

But the similarity to the late '60s and early '70s goes deeper than a desire to create a higher degree of institutional unity behind a call to anti-racism. More importantly, the current campaign is based on the same 1968 understanding of racism as the Empowerment campaign.

It is important to understand the implications of viewing racism through the 1968 lens. The racial history of the United States is very long. There are stages and periods in this history, as there are stages and periods in every history. Set against the long history of thinking about race in the United States, the years 1968 to 1971 were very atypical years.

Please recall 1968, as you are willing and able, and remember the setting of the Luau's *BAC/BAWA* struggle. It was the declining days of the Lyndon Johnson administration and just before the first term of the Richard Nixon administration.

Lyndon Johnson had been elected in 1964 following the passage of

the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This legislation was the legal culmination of the Southern Civil Rights struggle that had captured the high moral ground of the entire nation. The Republican Party then nominated Barry Goldwater to run against Johnson. Goldwater was one of the few Republican Senators who had voted against the Civil Rights Act. In the election of 1964, Johnson was propelled to office by a huge voter turnout and enjoyed the support of organized labor, the Democratic Party organizations of most northern cities, a large and mobilized African American voting population in the North, and the energetic and enthusiastic support of white intellectuals. In contrast, Goldwater carried only five states in the Deep South and his home State.

Johnson coalition exploded in the next four years. Conflict between 'Black' radicals and the "civil rights" leaders ('Negroes' and white liberals) emerged as a call for Black Power. The urban riots/uprisings demonstrated the alienation of the urban African-American population from the Democratic organizations. The temporary political alliance between the Southern Civil Rights Movement and the Democratic urban political machines broke down. The white working class of the cities turned against African-Americans over job competition and crime. A progressive student movement, the New Left, developed which had both radical and moderate wings.

In sum, throughout the years 1964 to 1968, a series of battles were waged which marked the breakup of that Johnson coalition, battles which took the form of "radicals" vs. "liberals." The battle was especially intense among white intellectuals between the radical and liberal camps. The Empowerment controversy within the UUA was one skirmish in that much larger conflict.

The issue was whether white liberals in their efforts at reform were "in the system" or "against the system." The radicals were able to successfully make the argument that trying to reform American society was morally equivalent to defending its most oppressive aspects. Revolutionary action was called for; anything less was immoral. All of the white liberals who had been mobilized by the civil rights movement, the student movement and the antiwar movement<sup>1</sup> came under enormous pressure during the period 1968 to 1971 to prove themselves to be really progressive. As Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver explained, "You are either part of the problem or part of the solution." White liberals were told that they were privileged under the system and hence part of the problem, until they had taken specific steps to become part of the solution.

It was no accident that the UUA became a battleground in this con-

flict. According to James Forman, one of the founders of SNCC, black revolutionary activists had come to the conclusion that reparations were the only way that black America could acquire the resources to wage a struggle for liberation. It was also clear that the breakup of the liberal-radical coalition meant that funding sources for revolutionary black activity were waning. In this situation, the group decided to pursue a strategy of getting a down payment on the reparations due Black America from the white liberal churches.

As we look back at that period now, it is easy to see that many of the fierce battles between radicals and liberals were a sideshow in American politics. Regardless of the power balance between radicals and liberals with the general left, the balance of power was shifting to the general right. The defection of the white south and the white urban working class from the Democratic Party enabled the election of Richard Nixon, Conservatives have been mobilizing a majority by appealing to popular revulsion to the movements of the '60s ever since.

All of this history reminds us that the principle assertion that underlies the strategy of our anti-racism effort, now over thirty years later, was formulated in a particular time and place and in a particular political struggle. It still asserts the radicals' position in their battle with liberals: "White liberals are white racists."

The irony of this assertion becomes clearer as you trace the trajectory of all of these elements forward from 1969.

In 1968, Black radicals asserted that they wanted Black Power and they have been amassing it ever since. The black activists of 1969 are now elected officials. African Americans have consolidated remarkable voting power and discipline, establishing their own sources of institutional power within the political structure. The Voting Rights Act enabled an increasing number of African American congressional representatives. Breakthrough African American mayors were elected in large cities. Increasingly, it has become clear that the African American community does not need white liberals to gain access to power.<sup>2</sup>

The 1969 white radical has vanished from the scene and survives in small local organizing projects, if at all. As a political force, they are insignificant.

But the trajectory of white liberals since 1969 is more interesting. Through the years, white liberals have, as a political force, remained faithful to the political aims and interests of African Americans. White liberals defended the riots as 'urban uprisings.' White liberals talked about the "root

causes of crime in poverty and joblessness" while crime rates went up and up. White liberals defended school busing and the welfare system, and still do. They defend the public schools against vouchers. No longer in any meaningful relationship with the white working class, the white liberals of 1969 have remained faithful to their understanding of African American interests, even though, the consequence has been to have lose all political power and influence in the country.

Because they can now deliver few votes and no power, white liberals are now the junior partners wherever they coalesce with African American political forces. They can only contribute money.<sup>3</sup>

Viewed historically, it is absurd to say that white liberals chose to defend their power and privilege rather than stand in solidarity with Black America. The last thirty years of political defeats for all progressive causes were not caused by betrayals by white liberals, but by other factors, including superior organizing and mobilization by conservatives.

Throughout the society, "the white liberal" has, today, become the object of widespread political contempt. We all know the terms: "limousine liberals," "white wine and brie liberals," the "Peugeot proletariat, " "Volvo democrats." White liberals are everywhere mocked for their excessive purism, for their enthusiasm for every passing cause, for their ethereal ideals and for their lack of real-world toughness. White liberals are everywhere mocked for their powerlessness and ineffectuality. I ask you: Does this sound like people who sold out in order to maintain their power and prestige?

### **The limits of 1968-71 thinking about race**

It seems to me that the psychological drama of the UUA's anti-racism campaign is partially that of a re-enactment ritual, a going back and re-doing the Black Empowerment campaign. This time, it is hoped, it will come out right, allowing us to lay aside our shame and rage. We have not changed the central and mistaken assertions that were made in that 1968-1971 period; that white liberalism equals white racism and democratic norms are simply cynical defenses of white racism.

Given all that has changed since 1969, why does it seem crucial to re-assert a line of analysis from that era: that white liberals are, in fact, white racists? Why is it crucial for the entire UUA to be educated (again) on this point, and for all of us to commit again to the partial truth of that proposition

as though it were wholly true?

I sense that the reason why is that this 1968 line of analysis still has large emotional power for us. It feels true, even through by any objective standard of measurement, it is less true than it seems.

Those events were traumatic events for the entire liberal movement, and in the lives of the people who were involved in them. For the most part, we have not yet reflected on those events, and their aftermath.

Most of us who were involved in the progressive movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s have never fully named and processed the enormous grief that we felt at the defeat of those movements. That unprocessed grief has turned, in time, to shame and rage. We are ashamed of ourselves and blame ourselves for the loss of our highest ideals. We are hyper aware of every shortcoming in our social practice, every private thought born of prejudice. We are very aware of our expanding wealth and waistlines compared to the persistence of poverty and injustice. In our shame, we have become very needy for affirmation from African Americans and very sensitive to criticism from them.

We are also filled with rage: rage that is free floating and hard to direct. We want someone to be angry at. We wish for a more clear-cut and overt racism that we could fight more openly .

And finally, we are enraged in situations which trigger our own shame. We will not be guilt tripped anymore, we say, by which we mean until the next time we are.

One result of our trauma thirty years ago is that we white liberals are hypersensitive to a critique from our left - - someone who questions the depth of our commitments and morality. A critique from our left recreates the emotional context of 1968, when we were under enormous pressure to prove that we were not racist, or sexist, or reactionary in some way. As we remember it, somehow we failed to measure up and, as a result, the causes we held most dear were defeated. Consequently, we find it difficult to maintain a clear-cut boundary on our left.

In this state of shame and rage, white liberals are easily manipulated and victimized. We desire to be in a relationship of solidarity with African Americans.<sup>4</sup> White liberals actively seek the approval of African Americans and are aware enough to doubt our own thinking about race. White liberals seek to extend themselves, perhaps even beyond our comfort zone, to build relationships with African Americans.

## **Racial Opportunism**

Consequently, we create a temptation for *some* African Americans to manipulate us for self-interest and personal gain. As a Christian, I am not surprised by this; I understand the universality of human sin and temptation. Let us name the practice as *racial Opportunism* and define it as the manipulation of whites' desire for solidarity with African Americans for personal gain or self-interest.

Racial opportunism is not an easy subject. Because the subject is not open, it only adds to our shame and rage. We are ashamed of our frequent suspicion of African American's assertion. We are enraged when our suspicions are borne out, as happens sometimes. We are even more ashamed when they are not, as also happens some of the time.

## **The Shadow Side of that Era and a Warning**

The question that must be asked is "Why would the UUA choose to recreate one of its most painful moments, especially when its pain and trauma was not objective?" One reason is that it feels normal; actually, it is that we are stuck emotionally at that moment in time. And therein lies a danger. By choosing to recreate the world of 1970, we place ourselves under an enormous and artificial pressure to prove ourselves<sup>5</sup>. When we combine a large number of white liberals anxious to prove themselves not racist and an intellectual atmosphere which does not acknowledge the temptation of racial opportunism among African Americans, we have created the conditions for one of the outcomes of the early '70s: totalitarian and coercive methods of organizing.

I raise this problem cautiously, but I am compelled to, out of my own experience. Briefly, I graduated from college in 1970 a very committed political activist and radical. I extended the period of 1968-71 for several years by continuing to be politically active on a full time basis. In order to prove myself "a genuine revolutionary" during the Ford Administration, I was recruited into a secret Marxist-Leninist-Maoist organization. Everything short of that came under the judgment that "It was not enough to ... "

Now, I understand that I was manipulated into submitting to the will of others in order to prove myself worthy. The problem is that I see many of the rhetorical signs of the same sorts of manipulation in use right now in the anti-racism struggle in the UUA.

So how does coercive organizing work?

1. There has to be a great cause for which people want to struggle. Certainly our desire to dismantle racism and our desires to be in a deeper relationships of solidarity with African American people are such causes.

2. Coercive organizing depends on the concept of a vanguard leadership. Vanguard leadership bases its authority on some form of category, such as race, class or gender. The legitimacy of leaders arises from their experience as members of that group.

The premise is all thinking is ideological. entirely driven by people's experience. It is the leaders' experience of oppression that makes their thinking accurate and true. Leadership and followership are thus, not in a mutual and reciprocal relationship.

During the 1970s, we recited the slogan "Follow the leadership of the most oppressed." The organization into which I was recruited validated itself by its black leadership. The leaders at a Jubilee Workshop that I attended recently said, "It is necessary for whites to be accountable to people of color." Isn't the same premise at work here? In order to be included in the team that was to provide anti-racist leadership for the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, one had to affirm in writing that "it is impossible for us (the white members of First Dallas) to become anti-racist on our own resources. "

3. If the thinking of the leaders is validated by their social position, then it follows that the thinking of those who do not follow their leadership is also seen as ideological. a rationalization of their social position. The actual content of an argument, its logic, its historical accuracy, its consistency with religious tradition mean nothing compared to the demographic category of its maker. The vanguard leadership claims the power to penetrate the hearts and minds of others and can tell what they are really thinking. It soon gets established that those who do not follow the leadership are in fact the enemy, and that whatever they say or think is a cover for reactionary thinking. For a current example, see Denny Davidoff's assertion in the March/April *UU World* that people are hiding behind Thandeka in order to protect their racism.

4. If the revolutionary leadership has the power to understand how every argument of their opponents are rationalizations for privilege, then it follows that they have the power to dismiss their followers' intellectual doubts and misgivings whenever they occur. Followers learn to dismiss their own thinking by watching the leaders discount the thinking of others. They come to recognize those thoughts that question the vanguard as being the

voice of their class, gender or racial privilege and they train themselves to silence that voice

5. Part of the asymmetry of the vanguard leadership/followership relationship is that the leadership communicates that it is not concerned with follower's feelings and emotional responses at all. Leaders argue that the concern for the feelings of followers, which arise out of their subjective sense of privilege, will divert them from their more important role.

In the organization into which I was recruited, I was asked to sacrifice autonomy over my own self, where I worked, where I lived, with whom I lived. The leaders were not and claimed that they should not be concerned with my emotional discomfort with this; it was just middle-class individualism. Currently, the March/April *UU World* quotes Leon Spencer telling us that it is not his job to be concerned about the feelings of white people, but only the feelings of people of color.

It is remarkable how much the rhetoric of whites in the anti-racism movement has a masochistic motif. "This stuff hurts and it is supposed to hurt." Acceptance that we advance toward higher consciousness only through pain is crucial to the success of coercive organizing. Once this principle is internalized, the followers have learned to silence all of their own warning signals of danger, all of their own critical tools. They have learned to dismiss their intellectual misgivings and disregard the warning signs that painful emotions give them of danger.

6. Coercive organizing depends on a perception of a very sharp polarity: one is either "part of the solution or part of the problem." There can be no middle ground, no other paths up the mountain. Anti-racism means one thing and one thing only, according to the Journey Toward Wholeness "a commitment to dismantling the structures of the Status quo that build racism into our culture. In a religious body that will not insist on a single definition of the holy, or of worship or of God, we insist on a single definition of the most complex aspect of our social system. And that definition is not analytical, but prescriptive. It is a political creed, to be filled in later.

Notice the statement in the March/April *UU World* that no more than 5% of the people in the denomination are committed anti-racists. Of course, they mean that only 5% have been through their particular training process. There is apparently no other way to be an anti-racist. The statement reveals much. Of course, this must provoke anxiety on the part of everyone who has ever aspired to be an, anti-racist

The Faith in Action Department sees itself as able to designate who is and who is not an anti-racist. And if one is not an anti-racist, then one is, according to the same leaders, complicit in racism. This is the leadership that is trying to organize a large group of white liberals who are desperately seeking the approval of African Americans to relieve a sense of shame that has crippled them for decades. There is a coercive element in the situation.

Many of us have been committed to oppose racism for decades. Now, we will find out whether our work and our selves are acceptable or not. What would you do, or not do, to receive this affirmation? How would you evaluate those choices? Your own thinking is unreliable; your own feelings are unreliable. Your boundaries are gone, but weren't they, in fact, the boundaries protecting your white privileges?

7. As we enter into the stage of the crisis in which coercive organizing takes place, the gravest threat to the vanguard leadership is not the independent thought of the followers, but competitors from the same group as the vanguard. After all, the followers have been trained to follow leaders based on identity. If leadership is based on demographic category, then all potential competitors from that same category must be discredited.

In fact, one can get an accurate reading of how much self-interest has subverted a vanguard leadership group by watching how it deals with a potential competitor from the same group. Ideally, a leadership that bases its authority on its representation of the experience of an oppressed group would welcome others who share that experience but have come to different conclusions. Ideally, they would seek to accommodate those differences, but a leadership that is using its membership in an oppressed group opportunistically will want to discredit and freeze out the competitor.

In that light, it does not bode well to read the disgraceful semi-smear of Thandeka in a letter from the Chair of the Journey toward Wholeness committee in the March/April *UU World*

### **The Way Forward**

There are other ways to proceed toward an anti-racist UUA, broadly defined. But the essential element of any plan, and the element that seems to be lacking right now, is a commitment that relationships between whites and African Americans must be mutually and reciprocally accountable. The questions of self-interest, inappropriate group solidarity, white racism and privilege, and racial opportunism must be explicitly on the table<sup>6</sup>. Leadership cannot be unaccountable to those it leads. We have to understand that

placing unaccountable power in the hands of someone is not a favor, but is placing a stumbling block in their path. It is not empowerment in any interdependent sense of the word. It is in fact, morally irresponsible in the way that leaving your keys in your car's ignition is, or giving an angry person a loaded gun.

1. We must have a full frank review and reflection process on the BAC/ BAWA events, aimed at mutual disclosure of mistakes and errors. We must locate that event in the past and understand that we are no longer fighting that battle in the present. We should grieve the damage that it did to liberal religion. We should understand the roles that white racism and racial opportunism played in that event, and how perceptions of their continuing role have damaged our levels of trust and dialogue.

2. As we summarize and reflect on those events, having given up on changing their outcomes, we need to reflect on how the issues of race have intersected with three other continuing conflicts in the Association. It is my observation that much of the resistance to the anti-racism campaign comes from its relationship with these other, long-standing issues

- a. The unresolved humanist/theist debate<sup>7</sup>

- b. The continuing dispute over the authority and power of the central bodies vs. the local congregations; and

- c. The difficulties of preserving political diversity within our congregations.

3. We should undertake a general theological reappraisal of our movement: does our general theological message speak to the fullness of life, or does our message only speak to those moments of our power, competence, confidence and community? How does our theology deal with the persistence of human sin, including our complicity in the oppressive social structures? How does our theology provide hope to victims of oppressive social structures?

4. We need to re-examine our relationship to Christianity, and especially explore our relationships to African American Christianity, as historical movement, as a theological position, and as a worship movement and style. African American Christianity is one of the hidden secret sources of modern Unitarian Universalism, both in its vision of the politically engaged church and in its practice of spirit-filled worship.

5. We need to commit ourselves to democratic norms, mutual respect, congregational polity, freedom of conscience, letting people speak for themselves, mutual moral accountability and mercy.

6. We should continue an aggressive campaign to open the association and its associated congregations to people of color and especially, ministers of color. We should identify and remove those unconscious barriers to their participation in our religious life. There is no doubt that this is in creative tension with some of our other institutional practices and arrangements. Suitable changes will need to be made, but will only be made in an atmosphere of goodwill.

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<sup>1</sup> I omit the early women's movement because I think that its experience was a bit different.

<sup>2</sup> For a vivid indication of this, look at the behavior of African American elected officials in the 2000 Democratic Presidential Race. By every measure, Bill Bradley has a far clearer understanding of white racism and a far greater commitment to anti-racism than Al Gore. Yet most African American officials chose to endorse Gore, whom they see as being more likely to beat Bush, Jr. They know that their power does not depend on the anti-racism of white liberals, but on their own ability to contribute votes to a winning coalition.

<sup>3</sup> And yet, the 1988 Jackson Presidential campaign demonstrated that enough money for a respectable run for the Democratic Presidential nomination could be financed largely from the African American community itself. White liberals' money is no longer even necessary.

<sup>4</sup> It runs against current fashion to defend the existence of white liberalism and to distinguish it from white racism, but there is a distinction between an organization like the UUA, which is willing to struggle with issues of black empowerment and large numbers of other organizations which would have rejected the proposal out of hand. Read racists don't get involved in this kind of program and seem to be immune to the charge of being racist; it doesn't seem to bother them at all. A white liberal is someone who seriously considers the fact that he or she may be a racist.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the definition of anti-racism provided in the March/April *UU World* by spokespeople for the Faith in Action is a narrow and restrictive definition. The operative phrase of the definition is "It is not enough...." For example, "it is not enough to want more African Americans to join our congregations" and "It is not enough to want an affirmative action program for clergy" etc. The "it is not enough" litany is a technique for pressuring people to an extreme position to avoid being labeled complicit with racism.

<sup>6</sup> I do not believe that "reverse racism" or "black racism" are helpful concepts, as I do believe that "racism equals privilege plus power." But I do believe that racial opportunism (the use of white sympathy for African American causes for personal self interest, which can include prestige and power) is a real hindrance to the development of solidarity against racism.

<sup>7</sup> The Journey Toward Wholeness is, in some ways, the completion of the humanist vision of the UUA, almost entirely committed to "transforming social structures" by building certain kinds of communities. Worship in such a humanist religious movement is only a tactic to build up the community which exists to transform society. The humanist vision carries forward the religious outlook of the BUUC in 1968 which declared itself "Black Humanist."

## **Six Warning Signs of Coercive Organizing**

- 1) Claims of vanguard leadership that do not allow mutual and reciprocal accountability. Leadership that bases its authority on demographic category.
- 2) Unwillingness to deal respectfully with contrary opinion on its own terms; the assumption that the arguments of opponents are just a rationalization for their social position.
- 3) Leaders who tell you that they don't have to care about you. Leaders who do not commit to respecting your own reasonable boundaries. Leaders who tell you that it will hurt.
- 4) Leaders who withhold their approval, and establish a relationship in which you have to prove yourself over and over again to them.
- 5) Leaders who imply that they are the gatekeepers; they have the only way to achieve the goals. Leaders who say that you are either part of the problem or part of the solution, and that following them is the only way to be part of the solution.
- 6) Leaders who base their claim of authority on their category, yet take very competitive attitudes toward other leaders from that same category