Reflections on Women and Race

by Leslie Traub

featuring Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, Allison Manswell, Rosalyn Taylor O’Neale, Kimberly Rattley, Allyson Dylan Robinson, and Minjon Tholen with Nyki Caldwell
As women of Cook Ross, we represent the many who think about, experience, and witness the differences between and among people throughout the world. We are grandmothers, mothers, and women without children. We span generations. We are straight, lesbian, and trans, born across cultures, and speak multiple languages. Our families are multicultural and diverse in many ways. We are economists, anthropologists, and social workers. We are highly educated and spiritual. Some of us were the first to attend college in our families. We are educators, consultants, businesswomen, wives, sisters, and daughters. Our histories are remarkably diverse and yet there is a thread that binds us together. We have learned about each other, honored each other’s stories, and know that what connects us is our spirit—our willingness to both share and deeply listen to the “other,” and to bring that same listening and healing to the worlds we inhabit. We impart all our varied qualities and curiosity when we serve clients at Cook Ross.

While we continuously strive to be inclusive amid these differences, we remain particularly aware of the gaps across group identity that exist in our relationships as women. Understanding and experiencing the very real implications that such divides have on the workplace and other aspects of our everyday lives, we are personally and professionally committed to shifting our consciousness about difference, building on the gifts and intelligence that our unique identities bring to stimulate social belonging and social capital for all. In so doing, we seek to lead the process and set an example for the future by building bridges and strengthening bonds that acknowledge, embrace, and uplift women’s intersectionality. At Cook Ross, we believe that such efforts should be made across all identities. Here, in acknowledgement of the overlooked, undervalued, yet imperative role played by this group in society, we begin with ourselves as women; particularly, women across race.
OUR INTENT

With this thought paper, we hope to stimulate a dialogue among white women and women of color and other intersectionalities. As part of this interaction, we choose to surround ourselves intimately with greater diversity and to hold up the importance of knitting a collective understanding across difference. Doing this will raise our collective social capital, our collective success, and our well-being. Our intent is to deeply and profoundly influence how we approach each other—with greater compassion, commitment to inclusion, and healing for our fractured world. As women of Cook Ross, a company whose mission is to transform influential organizations to be more inclusive, we recognize the importance of exploring the spaces between women, especially in the workplace. Too much is at stake if we ignore this opportunity.

In the continuous process of shaping a culture of acceptance, authenticity, and trust among women within our own company, we have found that the best way is to create space and permission for each woman to have a unique story, shared from her own view of herself and her surroundings. Each of us is navigating the interpersonal relationships among all women in the workplace, and has found ways of being with one another that advance us individually and collectively. In this paper, we hope to provide insight into our individual journeys, and share a roadmap for other women to do the same.

WHY NOW?

The state of our world is veering toward a convergence of nationalism, populism, homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. At the same time, we are experiencing a deep, renewed activism and longing for connectedness. Yet the reality of our troubled society is not a new one. Societal inequities and threats against human rights were birthed long ago and remain entangled in our systems and structures today. Though longstanding, the conflict and tension that come from America’s history have felt ever-more present in 2017. Throughout history, we have seen the consequences that result from inequity and injustice, but also the progress that can be made when diverse people come together to forge the way to a better future.

Given these strong societal pulls, there is no time like the present to explore our individual and collective worldviews and how such views have played, and will continue to play, a role in shaping our reality.

Now is the time to do the arduous work; to learn how to meet one another where we are, lift each other up as women, experience each other with empathy, and direct our collective and individual passions and strengths toward bringing healing and power to our families, offices, communities, and institutions at large. In some relationships, such a process occurs organically. In most, however, this process must be learned and practiced.
I think my reticence about talking with white women about race comes after years of watching white women talk as supportive sisters until it no longer benefits them. The 2016 election voting record of white women, followed by the Women’s March, are the latest examples of race topping gender.

My first experience of this phenomenon was with Barbara. We met in elementary school and formed an immediate friendship. As one of the three black girls in the school and the only one in most of my classes, friendships with white girls were a necessity—at 11 you need a best friend. Barbara was that BF. We shared the trials and joys of being 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-graders. We were both interested in and participated in sports. We both came from middle-class homes with educated, socially connected, working parents.

We left Clark Elementary School and entered the strange world of junior high. For the first weeks, we remained best friends, discussing how strange it was to have classes that started and ended, lockers, and a cafeteria that served us in shifts.

About week three, Barbara was approached by an 8th-grader (I’ll call her Edna). We were standing at our lockers talking when she introduced herself. Because 7th-graders aren’t usually approached by 8th-graders, it felt like a big deal. Edna mentioned that there was a “club” that was interested in talking with some 7th-graders about joining. She said they met on Thursdays at the lunch table nearest the gym.

Barbara and I were excited. My friend told Edna that she would be at the lunch table gathering Thursday to meet some of the club members. I said I was interested in joining the club also. There was a look of curiosity and confusion on Edna’s face that I would see many times again during my life. Edna said she had to get to class and she’d see Barbara (she spoke only and directly to her) on Thursday. Our schedules didn’t allow us to see each other for a few days, but on Monday I caught up with Barbara. I asked if she joined the club. She seemed a little uncomfortable but we were 13, so awkwardness was par for the course.

When I said I’d like to come with her next time the club gathered, she stumbled to find the right words and finally said, “You’re not invited.” I asked why and she said something about the other girls had only invited her and she couldn’t bring someone new.

It didn’t take long for me to understand that “new” meant black. It didn’t mean Jewish, it didn’t mean poor, it didn’t mean anything other than black (or Negro as we were called at the time). From that day onward, and throughout our time in junior high, Barbara and I only shared seats in the same classroom. At lunchtime, she and her club members ate together. After school, she and the club members went shopping, to movies, and other social events.

Barbara was glad to have me as a friend until her whiteness and my blackness became a dividing line. I never spoke of my pain and the feelings of betrayal to Barbara. For many years I didn’t tell my black or my white friends this story. When I did tell my white women friends and partners, I felt as if they viewed it as simply adolescent girl behavior. They missed the impact of the actions and the intensity of my hurt. My blackness as the reason for the hurt was dismissed.

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In the anthology *Skin Deep: Black Women & White Women Write About Race*, contributing essayist Retha Powers echoed my thoughts when she wrote:

“Despite our best efforts to avoid it..., each of us has adopted the rules of silence and dishonesty around matters of race. ... What I have learned most in my friendships with white women... is that race is too powerful to ignore. ... Black women and white women can be friends. However, it is different, and this friendship cannot allow the painful history of race in this country to force it toward dishonesty. In the words of Audre Lorde, our silences will not protect us.”

**BUILDING BONDS, BUILDING BRIDGES**

The instinct to retreat into our in-groups and separate ourselves from those who are different is strong when people feel both threatened and invisible. In tense times like these, this retreat brings safety and comfort. Because the human mind has negative and sometimes deep patterning against difference and the unknown, we find ease in what is familiar. The mind is programmed to avoid discomfort. Robert Putnam in the book *Bowling Alone* introduces a behavior called “bonding.” Bonding occurs in same-group relationships when connections are formed on the premise of similarity. This mechanism, conducted in intragroup settings, allows us to use shortcuts to create a sense of connection and safety simply from connecting with those who are like us. We perceive that there is less unknown and therefore less to fear. This intragroup bonding can cut off ideation, perspective, and input from those who are different, resulting at the same time in the potential for isolation and social distance from other groups.

By contrast, cross-group relationships exist through the mechanism of “bridging,” in which individuals find connection with people who differ from them across group, culture, or identity. Bridging allows us to share and access resources more difficult to locate through one’s own group. Like bonding, bridging can create a sense of shared purpose and a value that we are greater together than separate. Bridging can take on different characteristics in different identity groups, and is approached differently based on our cultural backgrounds. The end result of bridging, however, can often be a bond.

So how do Putnam’s concepts of bridging and bonding relate to women across race? Simply put, women who identify as the same race will likely bond, while women of different races look to bridge. Women of different backgrounds find commonalities in other aspects of their identities, likes, or dislikes in order to connect. In the context of American history, however, we know that the relationships between women across difference are not that simple. Given this history, we must consider and understand that the foundations on which white women bond and the foundations of bonding for women of color within intragroup relationships are very different. Due to the extensive history of oppression and inequity that women of color have faced and continue to face in this country, bonding occurs on the basis of shared life experiences derived from a shared struggle. While race is only one aspect of identity, race in America has always been shaped to mean something; in other words, privilege for white women, and disadvantage for women of color. Thus, while women of color are able to experience affinity with each other on the basis of race alone, white women rarely bond because of their race. White women, as members of a non-dominant gender group in society, are likely to expect they will bond with all other women in that context, but whether gender is a stronger identity than race depends on the life experience of the woman in question. How often have we heard from white women, “We’re all women, why can’t we just get along?”

I was leading a Women and Race dialogue session along with a colleague. A woman of color entered the circle right before we started; we know each other, and have a deep fondness for each other. I approached to give her a hug. She turned to the two women of color next to her and said jokingly, “I don’t know her.”

As hurtful and surprising as this was, it was a perfect opening to the circle. I learned (again) that it’s okay to be deeply connected across race in private, but in public, there are ramifications to how we believe we’re seen by others who share our group identities. As a white diversity professional, I have signed up for a lifetime of inquiry into my privilege and my relationships with women of color, among other identities. It’s been a sobering, challenging, and fulfilling journey, and one to which I recommit regularly. It’s taken many years of learning, deep listening, humility, and consciousness to not take these kinds of rejections personally, yet sometimes I still do. It’s also taken years of examining myself and my own misses, missteps, and interpretations to see how I’ve contributed to others’ reactions and responses to me.

The process of writing this paper with my colleagues has produced a significant insight for me.

Most of the personal stories except for my own began in the past. I am the only straight, white woman in the group. What I learned from my colleagues is that we’re starting in different places. I begin with the present day, what’s important to me now. They’re beginning in the beginning, where the patterns of discrimination and exclusion took root. Until I can share with them what my own beginnings were, the kind of privilege I grew up in and how that shapes the way I see myself and may not see others, we can’t sit across the table, eye-to-eye, to create together the world in which we hope to live.

I still have a commitment to keep looking at myself, and opening myself to feedback from others, so that we can turn our collective attention toward the misses, injustices, and blind spots that affect our shared world today. I know that white women and women of color inhabit different worlds. I want to forge a process for us to find each other, more easily, in ways more wholly and holy, one that allows our individual and collective lights to shine brightly and illuminate a pathway to a more inclusive world.

Similarly, bridging in women’s relationships across race often takes place from two different perspectives. As members of the dominant racial group in America and various other regions around the world, white women often assume a bond has been established faster than women of color would. White women, commonly patterned by their privilege, may believe that women should connect and support each other, regardless of differences. When differences exist, especially around race, whites, in a desire not to be perceived as biased or racist, may also look to move quickly to a sense of bonding in their relationships with women of color. Once a common element is recognized, white women are likely to feel a sense of ease, trust, comfort, and familiarity, all feelings associated with bonding. As a result, they may use shortcuts in communication with women of color as a way to acknowledge common ground, assuming that there is more of a relationship in place than is actually the case.
While white women today may be interested in pursuing relationships with women of color, the unintended impact of the behavior described above can have a negative impact for white women who are more likely to be comfortable with feelings of closeness and kinship more quickly than women who are not in the dominant group. This difficulty shows up in an experience of rejection, exposure, vulnerability, being belittled or dismissed, or being misunderstood when white women’s ‘can’t we all just get along’ and ‘our bond as women’ behavior is seen as crossing a line. It can be an easy pathway to becoming hurt and defensive. As a result of experiencing negative or embarrassing outcomes, the risk associated with bridging for white women can prevent them from seeking initial relationships or pursuing deeper connections with women of color.

Women of color experience bridging and bonding from a different standpoint. Unlike white women, women of color are more hesitant as a result of sometimes-bitter life experiences resulting from friendships with white women.

Here’s why it becomes necessary to understand the context of race in America. For women of color, the risk associated with entering relationships with white women is tied less to the possible feeling of rejection than it is the virtue of trust. Throughout history, trusting white people, not just white women, had the potential to lead to serious consequences for people of color. In America, to be able to trust that entering relationships with those around you will not result in dire negative consequences is in itself a privilege. A privilege afforded to few. As a result, when presented with the opportunity to bridge across race in relationships with white women, women of color may come off as being standoffish and formal, potentially eroding trust already established and causing white women to perceive and affirm stereotypes. Bridging behavior for women of color, observed as easing into the relationship, protecting their vulnerability and history, and testing the waters of safety, can look very different than the behavior of white women, and as such can be subject to the negative interpretations noted above. These patterns leave much room for misunderstanding and disconnect, but also form a platform from which to build the bridge.

These reactions and responses to each other are natural and reflect our life experiences, which create the biases that are designed to ensure our survival. Until we can understand this about each other, the healing that needs to happen among women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds will not progress as fast as so many of us desire. This too is true with other intersections in identity, including sexual orientation, socioeconomic differences, and physical abilities. We as women must come together across our differences in mutually acceptable ways, then model for our society and workplaces what is possible. Setting this example will begin when we’re willing to sit in the discomfort, honestly share our truths and experiences with each other, and express that connectedness to the world.

Some believe that we have reached a “post-racial America” in which all individuals are now equal and able to pursue a life of liberty and happiness; that justice rings true and can be depended on for fair outcomes for all; and that legislation has been created to remedy pain suffered and promote an equal society in terms of race and gender. This reality, however, remains elusive: our society is still disproportionately unequal. What we need to realize collectively is that it is not just about reaching equality, but rather equity.

We plead to each other,
We all come from the same rock
We all come from the same rock
ignoring the fact that we bend
at different temperatures
that each of us is malleable
up to a point.

Yes, fusion is possible
but only if things get hot enough —
all else is temporary adhesion,
patching up.

— Cherrie Moraga, The Welder
My earliest memory of being defined in a profoundly hurtful way by the use of a derogatory racial term remains with me today. And on another occasion that was certainly less hurtful but no less unfair, I was defined exclusively in terms of my gender.

One day when I was four years old, accompanying my mother to her hairdresser’s home in the South, I wandered beyond where my mother told me I could play. When I crossed an invisible line between a “white” and a “colored” neighborhood, a little white boy spotted me and chased me back across that invisible line as he shouted: “Get out of here nigger! Niggers don’t belong here!” I also remember a particular afternoon, when I was four or five years old, playing outside with a small group of African-American girls and boys. One of the boys began to taunt me: “You can’t climb this tree because you’re a girl.”

My response was to climb that tree!

Many years later, as I became an activist in the civil rights and women’s movements, I fully understood that one of those little boys was expressing deeply entrenched racist ideology and practices; the other, who was himself a victim of racism, was expressing sexist ideology and practices. Growing up in those horrific days in the segregated South, I was far more conscious of my own victimization as a black person than as a girl.

Not long after I found my place in the academic world as a professor of Anthropology, it was clear to me that black folks were grossly underrepresented in the curricula, on the faculties, and in the student bodies of American colleges and universities. I joined with my students and progressive faculty and staff in calling for the establishment of Black Studies programs and departments and a substantial increase in the numbers of black faculty and students. But it was not long before I began to ask: Where are the women in Black Studies? It was that question that led me to the interdisciplinary field of Women’s Studies. But, alas, it was not long again before I had to pose the question: Where are the women of color in Women’s Studies?

During the time that I taught at Hunter College in New York, I developed a close, sisterly relationship with Audre Lorde, a black, lesbian, feminist, civil rights activist writer who was also a professor at the college. I remain deeply indebted to her for helping me confront my homophobia. Audre Lorde also taught me the importance of owning my multiple identities—that is, my race, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, religion, age, and physical and cognitive abilities. Once I accepted the importance of seeing myself in terms of my multiple identities, I was better able to understand how one can be the victim of one or more forms of bigotry and discrimination while at the same time victimizing others on the basis of several systems of inequality. And so I not only came to understand that I, as a black woman, had to deal with my heterosexism, I also reached a better understanding of why so many women of color are resistant to the notion of an all-embracing sisterhood—they are aware of how many white women have failed to deal with their own racism.

When I address women of color as “my sister,” there is an acknowledgement of a closeness resulting from each of us having experienced the pain and the joy of being women, AND an acknowledgement that we have also known the bitter sting of racism— including when practiced by white women. When I address a white woman as “my sister,” it is an aspirational statement, a hope that she has or will go through the incredibly difficult and inevitably painful process of dealing with her racism.

I dream of the day when there can be a true sisterhood among all women, who, as a Native American saying reminds us, hold up half the sky.
WOMEN AND RACE IN THE WORKPLACE

Much data has been collected that compares women and men in the workplace. Research has shown that organizations with more women in leadership are more successful — both financially and in leading and supporting an effective culture. Women receive more college degrees than men, start more small businesses, and employ a greater percentage of the workforce. The number of women in the U.S. workplace has increased steadily since the late 1940s, rising to roughly 73.5 million by 2015, according to the latest available U.S. Department of Labor data. At the same time, women remain less likely to hold positions of power or authority within corporate environments. They also report greater discontent in the workplace, specifically tied to equitable opportunities for professional development and advancement. We also know that as businesses and institutions have invested in development, mentoring, and sponsorship for women, the primary beneficiaries of those programs have been white women.

While much work has been done to explore the relationship and discrepancies that exist between men and women in the workplace, less attention has been placed on the interactions that women experience with one another, and thus how those interactions affect work satisfaction, work performance, and ultimately the experience of all women in the professional sphere. In September 2016, The Wall Street Journal reported on data from LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Co. showing women of color have more ambition for executive jobs than white women do, but less opportunity for career development than their white female counterparts. The research suggests that women of color are the most underrepresented group in the senior and upper ranks of companies, and their numbers drop steeply at the middle and senior levels. Women of color make up 12 percent of first-level managers, compared with 45 percent for their white male peers. At the C-suite level, women of color make up just 3 percent of that elite workforce, versus 71 percent for white men. Clearly, female colleagues working together across racial lines — instead of against each other — can be a powerful force to close this glaring management gap.

If we knew each other and ourselves better, perhaps we could provide the necessary social capital (support, allyship, encouragement, and empathy) to enable the fulfillment of our paths, and a healthy future for our society. Knowing each other’s stories is a way to begin that long journey.

![More Ambition](chart1)

Women of color are more likely than white women to want to be a top executive.

<table>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>53%</td>
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![Less Opportunity](chart2)

Women of color, especially black women, generally say they have less chance for career development than white women.

The percentages of each group saying that in the past two years they:

- Participated in an important development/training opportunity
- Got a challenging assignment/project
- Got a better job title
- Got a promotion

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
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I grew up in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, surrounded by people who looked like me. My high school class of 140 included only two people of color: Rodney, who was African-American, and Kim, who was Asian. Over the four years we attended school together, I spent no more than two hours in conversation with Rodney. We weren’t in any of the same classes or on any of the same sports teams, so our social circles rarely intersected. During those same four years, however, I spent hundreds, maybe thousands, of hours watching television shows like “Sanford & Son,” “The Jeffersons,” “Diff’rent Strokes,” and “The Cosby Show.”

By the time I left home for college, I was carrying two powerful illusions with me. First, I sincerely believed my parents’ generation had solved the problem of racism for good. That’s what my history classes, all of which were taught by white teachers, seemed to be saying in the way we studied the civil rights movement. The experiences of George and Louise Jefferson, Arnold and Willis, and the Cosbys appeared to confirm it. Depictions of racism on those shows were always by the hand of a single white acting in isolation, excused by his or her ignorance, and fixed with a little basic education in 30 minutes or less. (Incidentally, as someone who was assigned the male sex at birth and was socialized male, I also entered adulthood believing my grandparents’ generation had solved sexism.)

The second illusion I carried unawares. The homogeneity of my “real-life” experience, combined with the false impressions given to me by the media and my education, created in me an inaccurate and biased picture of life as a black person in America. That picture would lead me to biased thoughts, biased judgments, and biased behaviors, and it would be many years before I even recognized it was there.

I gradually shed the first illusion, about the elimination of sexism, in my 20s and 30s; my gender transition, and the awakening to the reality of privilege that accompanied it, sealed the deal. But the second, insinuated upon my consciousness by my culture, my society, and my community, has proven harder to root out. It frightens and angers me to know there are remnants of it lying undetected, infecting my subconscious like a cancer. Despite my best intentions, I know it is still influencing my thoughts and behaviors, causing me to contribute to the same systemic racism that infected me in the first place.

WHAT IS ALLYSHIP?

Historically speaking, an ally is a member of a dominant group who questions or rejects dominant institutions and ideologies. We have been operating under a traditional view of allyship, which has not supported our ability to build bridges because of the implied power dynamics. Allies work as advocates for oppressed peoples, either together within their dominant group, or directly with those people. This model, while it may have worked in the past, isn’t sustainable because of the power differentials that uphold the dominant culture. A patronizing attitude of benevolence and “helping” conveyed by white women to women of color reinforces a perception of superiority that ensures that distance is maintained. We know that we’re locked into an old paradigm of allyship when allies claim “ally” as an identity, and leverage this status for personal gain.
The traditional view of allyship also implies a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation. For this reason and many others, it’s important to re-examine this approach.

A new approach to allyship is essential, and Cook Ross can help your organization achieve it by taking these steps:

• Doing one’s own work to be at peace with our racial identities before becoming an effective ally.
• Embracing courageous conversations as a way of being across identity groups; being willing to sit in the fire, often.
• Practicing solidarity among all women in the workplace by being invested in what each other is concerned about.
• Although action speaks louder than words, sharing well-placed words can go a long way.
• Intervening for each other whenever inequity is practiced or perceived, whether one is in the room or not. Note that this can create a double bind for white women. The expectation is that white women allies use their positions and privilege to speak on behalf of the non-dominant group — which can cause women of color to question the idea of white women speaking for them. The best allyship is standing side by side on behalf of each other, supporting each other’s well-intentioned actions. This is a two-way allyship, not unilateral.

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed.
But when we are silent we are still afraid.
So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive.
— Audre Lorde
My identity as a woman of color is complex. I’m very aware that throughout my life, I’ve had best girlfriends who are white. In fact, my current BFF is 15 years younger than I, blonde, and married — all identity aspects that are completely different from mine. And yet despite these dissimilarities, the safety, compassion, and friendship we share continues to be life-affirming on the deepest of levels. I need her and I know she needs me.

But the truth is that even though we share a deep love and respect, she will never be able to feel the pain behind the fact that African-American women are the least-married in the world. She can feel the sadness behind Black Lives Matter but she will never know the fear that arises when I think of my nephew going down South. She is aware of the discomfort I feel when I walk into a white Congregational church with her but she doesn’t feel it deep down herself.

It meant a lot to me when she said that she didn’t want to make the new church she was visiting in her new hometown of Charlotte, N.C., her home church because it wasn’t diverse enough. I’m not sure of all the internal reasons for her decision, but just hearing her say it was comforting.

Most days, I think more about my relationship with my other brown sisters than I do with white women. I’m more aware of the awkward gulf that exists when I meet a woman from Somalia or Haiti, for example. I feel a desire to connect through our gender, but the cultural differences seem glaring to me.

There are always surprises, but when it comes to relating to women across races, you might say I’m comfortable in my own skin. And I am fortunate to help others try to reach this point through my work.

BUILDING ALLYSHIP

With this background in mind, we can begin to understand why we each experience the world so differently. There is good reason for this. It is well-documented that we have less empathy for people whose skin color is different than ours. When we are the non-dominant group, we are more likely than those in the dominant group to interpret the world through our identity. We are more likely to use negative stereotypes and apply those assumptions to people who are different from us. These are all habitual brain patterns. It will take consciousness, commitment, open hearts, and processes to override these patterned responses. And we have to redefine allyship to reflect a more contemporary reality.

Building bridges is tough work. We cannot change our history, but we can build bridges if we’re courageous enough to engage in the struggle to understand each other. And at the end of the day, we know from our own experience that the fear of trying to connect and being rejected is often the obstacle that keeps us from ever connecting at all.  

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Imagine two 13-year-old African-American boys sitting in an empty movie theater, tickled to have the place to themselves. Shortly before the movie starts, two white girls from their school enter the theater and sit in the same row, two seats down. It’s a strange choice, given the plethora of empty seats.

Once the comedy starts, the boys proceed to laugh and enjoy the film. The girls issue their first warning for them to be quiet and the boys ignore it. After a few increasingly heated exchanges, one of the girls announces “If you don’t sit quietly, I will call Security on you guys!”

One of these boys was my son.

And there you have a 2016 example of the history of women and race in America.

As illustrated in the true story above, white women are socialized early and often to understand the power they have to be the beginning and ending of the “justice system” for black men. This dynamic goes back to slavery, continues through the Jim Crow era and still plays out every day across America. Black women are forced to watch this power play out and assume the emotional role of providing support, only to have some black men prefer white women as wives. There is a world of additional dynamics between those lines, but you get the message. As an African-American mother and practitioner of diversity and inclusion, I have experienced and studied this dynamic from various angles and come to a few conclusions.

The narrative about gender in America is often told from the perspective of the “Women’s Movement,” which was actually the white women’s movement. The early suffragettes did not even pretend to be fighting for women of color.

As a Canadian woman of African and Caribbean descent who has lived in the U.S. for the past 25 years, I still enjoy the elements of my culture that give me significant influence in my household. During my career, I have found my cultural identity to have benefited me in several ways: I am not as affected by gender bias as some other women I have met, and I have a very high comfort level interacting in all-male environments. That might be a function of having three sons and a house full of testosterone for most of my life, but my experience shows that there are many women from other parts of the world who have a similar orientation and enjoy the same benefits. This natural confidence with men can have its downside when male leaders consistently compare your behavior with their expectation of white women and the dutiful American “June Cleaver” archetype they have been conditioned to expect.

Women of color have consistently demonstrated support for our white sisters. However, the reverse has not always been true. A few recent examples: when Sandra Bland was murdered in a jail cell, white women were silent. When we saw a 13-year-old African-American girl in McKinney, Texas, assaulted by a white male police officer, white women were silent. When 53 percent of white American women supported Trump for president (over a white woman), they showed the world that race trumps gender as a social and political issue. When they decided to march the day after he was inaugurated, they were very clear about “sticking to the talking points” that supported their agenda and refraining from clouding their issues with other messages, such as Black Lives Matter.

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Allyship requires courage, commitment, and learning to become comfortable with the uncomfortable moments in conversations about race and difference without being defensive and feeling ashamed. As you consider your path toward each other in your organization, ask yourself these questions:

• In what relationships do I want to invest?
• With whom do I need to have a courageous conversation?
• How do I enter this conversation? Do I do this from my perspective, or from the perspective of the woman I’d like to connect with?
• What risks and vulnerabilities am I willing to take on? Can I really say “I’d really like to get to know you, but I’m afraid that…”
• What mutual actions can we take to move those relationships forward?

Courage is the most important of all of the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.

— Maya Angelou
Gender and race have always been complex social-political constructs, reflecting changing global and local values and realities throughout history. For Millennials like myself, this is no different.

As the most diverse generation to have ever lived, we seem to be more aware of the complex intersections of identity we occupy. As a result, we are becoming more comfortable with challenging traditional, one-dimensional, and binary concepts of gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity, immigration status, and other diversity dimensions.

For example, as someone adopted from Sri Lanka, raised in the Netherlands in a white family and now residing in the United States, my relationship to race and ethnicity is not clear-cut. Racially speaking, I’m Sri Lankan, but my culture and citizenship are Dutch and in the midst of that, I’ve never quite been able to define my ethnicity. Similar to people who are mixed-race or part of immigrant families, interracial adoptees constantly have to renegotiate our nuanced identity in a world that forces us into boxes in which we don’t neatly fit.

Just because we are more diverse as a generation does not mean we automatically make decisions with diversity in mind or are more naturally inclined to practice inclusive behavior. We don’t have any fewer biases than previous generations and we are not post-racial or post-feminism. Rather, we find ourselves in a world where we need to protect the progress we’ve made and work to advance inclusion more than ever. If diversity and inclusion are one of our generation’s core values, we need to be extra-vigilant in confronting ourselves with our own unconscious biases and exclusive behaviors.

I often reflect on my own perceptions of and behavior toward other women, and try to challenge myself when I notice they change depending on someone’s age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or religion, for example. How can I and my generation break through a U.S.-centric framework and cultivate a global mindset about women and race across the world? What can we all do to work together across generations to advance women and other genders of all backgrounds?

I’m offering more questions than answers, and that is exactly my intention: It is critical to ask difficult questions and challenge ourselves. We may not have immediate or easy answers, but it helps us to avoid getting complacent. Concepts like gender and race will continue to evolve as our world becomes even more divided, diverse, global, and ambiguous. It is up to us to continue to innovate the ways in which we work together to advance diversity, inclusion, equity, accessibility, and opportunity for all.

In the words of indigenous artist and activist Lilla Watson: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come to help me because your humanity is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”
Cook Ross offers dialogue groups for women across difference and hosts a two-day public course on Women and Race. Check our website, CookRoss.com, for more details.

Continue the dialogue about building relationships across difference on social media by using #WomenAndRace and tag us @CookRoss.

@CookRoss @CookRossInc

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Traub is a respected national leader in the field of diversity, inclusion, and change management. With more than 25 years of experience, Leslie creates sustainable systems of change that yield greater performance, profit, and possibility. She specializes in customizing and facilitating training programs, executive-level coaching, and organization-wide change and team development. Since joining Cook Ross in 1994, Leslie has developed an international reputation for leading systems-based change in shifting an organization’s perspectives and practices on diverse talent, especially for women. She leads major engagements with financial, professional services, legal, energy, and scientific organizations, as well as numerous federal agencies.

ABOUT COOK ROSS INC.

Our mission is to provide powerful solutions to organizations around the world in the areas of diversity, inclusion, cultural competency, leadership development, and organizational change management. We are a certified women-owned consulting firm committed to creating organizations in which all people communicate effectively, recognize their value, develop as leaders, and contribute powerfully to their organizations.

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