



The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity  
433 Mendenhall Laboratory  
125 South Oval Mall  
Columbus, OH 43210  
[www.kirwaninstitute.org](http://www.kirwaninstitute.org)

### Musings on Linked Fate

**Wendy G. Smooth, Assistant professor in the Department of Women's Studies with a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute**

Much of Kirwan's current work is focused on transforming the ways we think and talk about race in this country. One critical transformation is to move toward viewing the life circumstances of Americans as intertwined, rather than separate and individual. We have discussed this as exercising a sense of "linked fate."

I was first introduced to the concept of linked fate through Michael Dawson's book, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (1994). Dawson's book launched a productive body of scholarship for those interested in black politics and political psychology. In *Behind the Mule*, Dawson argues that blacks tend not to elevate class interests above race interests and will support policies that they perceive in the interests of blacks as a group, even if such programs appear to violate their class interests. So, for example, middle class blacks are likely to support policies and programs that will ultimately result in an increase to their own taxes, if they perceive that the policies will better the life circumstances of other blacks. Middle class blacks are willing to act politically against their own class interests for the benefit of their race interests. Dawson goes further to suggest that blacks operate according to what he terms the "black utility heuristic" which governs and informs the ways blacks think and act politically. Essentially, blacks make decisions of what is in their individual interests based upon the ideas of what is good for the group—they become one in the same. This "short cut" suffices as an appropriate substitute for individual interests. Simply, what's good for the group is good for me.

Dawson's articulation of black linked fate situates blacks' political thinking and action in direct opposition to the American sense of individualism. Individualism asserts that every person's destiny is separate and is not dependent on the success of others. In other words, only one's own success matters. For Dawson then, blacks think and operate differently substantially deviating from the dominant American thought processes. This offers an explanation for the stability of the black community's support for the Democratic Party.

So, what accounts for this sense of linked fate among blacks? Dawson argues that blacks' sense of linked fate derives from a common understanding of the historic circumstances blacks faced in the U.S. A common understanding of a shared history of segregation, prejudice and discrimination constitutes the black experience and has created a shared

outlook. The historical experience is reinforced by current perceptions that blacks are not doing as well as whites economically. The shared history combined with current perceptions of inequalities give way to this sense of linked fate. This of course underscores the major role that race has played and continues to play as an organizing feature of life in America. The black utility heuristic reflects the collective action of blacks in response to the persistence of such racial cleavages.

What if this type of thinking and political action, one grounded in linked fate were extended beyond blacks? What would it mean to adapt such a frame that draws on this idea of utility and efficiency in making individual decisions informed by the good of the collective? Certainly, it is challenging to think of how the core American value of individualism might be displaced among the larger population. Sure, a critical component of Dawson's linked fate is the historical experience of the group. But, what of its possibilities, minimally among people of color, such that people of color viewed their fates as linked, intertwined. This would shift a number of major political issues currently facing the nation. The current debate on immigration comes to mind as an issue that might shift if native born (both black and brown) and immigrants (both black and brown) alike processed the improved circumstances of new immigrants as fundamental to their own successes.

Since so much of Dawson's linked fate is grounded in a shared history, perhaps in our conversations regarding transforming the ways we think about race we too might begin with an historical analysis of how groups share similar historical realities. To start, black and brown people share many commonalities in terms of historical and current experiences with discrimination and prejudice. The question is how do we begin to make the similarities of these histories more visible? This is as much about the realities of people's circumstances as it is about their *perceptions* of each other's circumstances. These are significant challenges. Those concerned with building towards a broadened sense of linked fate will find that articulating the commonalities in these ways are consistently met with opposition.

In this thought exercise on the possibilities of extending the concept of linked fate beyond the black community, I recognize that linked fate is not always an ideal politics. Indeed, the idea of linked fate has not subsumed the imagination of black political scientists. The idea of linked fate has been met with criticism. To be sure, we must question the strength of linked fate, as multiple identities and interests exist within black America. Evelyn Simien's new book *Black Women's Voices in Politics* (2006) argues that Dawson's concept of linked fate obscures the various dimensions of black political thought and reinforces the notion that a unified black agenda exists and by extension questions the legitimacy of a black women's agenda. Likewise, as Cathy Cohen in *The Boundaries of Blackness* (1999) asserts, the politics of linked fate serve to define who is and is not a part of the recognized black community. The black middle class shapes the agenda of the black community and its issues become central, those falling outside of this group are rendered politically mute with no claims to the black agenda.

Despite these concerns, I am interested in what it means to have a sense of linked fate across communities of color. Perhaps the best scenario is to think of linked fate as varying across issues. In the simplest of terms, the type of linked fate I am discussing is much like the common ideal that “I should care about your issue, because if it’s you today, it will be me tomorrow.” A more complex vision of this linked fate is the understanding that what is happening to you *right now* impacts what is possible for me *right now*—and I act accordingly.