CASES AND QUOTES

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Case Description: Abstract This paper explores the emergence of constraints within managerial networks and the strategies by which individuals reclaim autonomy. Drawing on Harrison C. Whites theoretical frameworks, we construct and analyze composite case narratives, informed by co-author experiences in a global investment bank. Our narratives highlight pathways along which professional relationships-initially pursued for career advantage-crystallize into binding constraints. We also describe how strategies such as annealing, network reach, and prolepsis restore autonomy. We thus portray autonomy as a fluid condition, regained through strategic interactions that reconfigure network ties and conversational frames. We further explore how status shapes the feasibility of these strategies, with lower-status actors relying on frame-switching tactics and higher-status actors using forward-looking rhetoric. Our discussion contributes to the literature on networks and leadership, emphasizing how identity, control, and status interact to constrain or catalyze managerial agency.? Keywords: identity, control, markets, status, roles Introduction Switching conversational frames (White 2008) can be eye-opening. Consider the case of Sofia and Carl.1 As the COO of a global investment bank, Sofia started her town hall in a high-stakes, combative frame, emphasizing radical candor (Scott 2019) as the banks new leadership anchor. While Sofia projected confidence, her insistence on candor masked her frustration with a new, collaborative culture that had clouded her own ability to read the organization. With so many yes-men running around, striving to outdo each other as team players, she said, theyd all gone soft and were afraid to tell her the brutal facts. Candid dialogue was losing ground to ruinous empathy (Scott 2019). ? When Sofia opened the floor for questions, Carl, a senior quantitative analyst, saw his opportunity (White 1970). Carl started politely, but this was remembered as the whiskey before the knife. Carl attacked twice: the root cause of the yes-men culture was the banks dangerously subjective bonus system, he asserted, and Sofias role in nudging that system away from hard performance metrics was clear. Sofia felt a sting-how much had the turn toward teamwork, and the resulting production of yes-men, biased and ensnared her also? She nonetheless dodged Carls attacks-like Mayweather slipping past De La Hoya in the ropes. Fair point, Sofia said, her stance confident, yet engaged. And thats exactly why were getting back to our roots-in open, honest dialogue. Leadership isnt about deflecting blame-its about correcting course, its about re-centering. The room rewarded Sofia with support for cooling the exchange (White 2008), while Carls countenance sank, his face downcast. ? Sofia turned again to her wider audience before leaving the stage. She invited anyone interested to discuss radical candor in an informal group session. Intrigued by Sofias offer, Carl reluctantly joined-inching from the edge of the group toward Sofias whiteboard. In this low-stakes, collegial frame (Fuhse 2022: 229-30), Carl eventually confessed to Sofia that working in the banks new, softer culture-which Carl believed was largely of Sofias making-felt confining, like walking in molasses. Carl, taken aback by his honesty, even admitted feeling trapped in his role. Sofia nodded, realizing hers and Carls experiences were comparable. ? This paper, dedicated to the memory of Harrison C. White, draws on Whites models to sketch answers to two questions arising from the back-and-forth between Sofia and Carl. First, why might a manager find that relationships with colleagues-pursued for seemingly rational reasons-eventually crystallize as binding constraints? Second, what are plausible avenues up and out of these constraints-into autonomy? In addressing these questions, we recall Bearmans (2024) observation that for White, doing sociology was a normative project. He wanted to identify the tangible sources of constraint so that we could embrace and experience real freedom. White was searching for routes out of binding roles into novel behaviors. Our brief cases, like that of Sofia and Carl, thus start with an anatomy of entrapment, which we distill from Whites (1981; 2002) model of markets, applied at the level of the manager (Bothner, Stuart, and White 2004). Whites training as a theoretical physicist, and then as a pioneering theorist of social networks, inform our subsequent examinations of annealing and of network reach as routes from constraint to autonomy. Our concluding case draws again on the markets model, but differently. We close by considering a manager whose collaborative successes attract regulation, around which navigation becomes possible in ways aligned with Whites (2008) theory of identity and control. ? Entrapment Carl began as a hungry nomad. A newly-minted PhD in geometry, with prior work experience in spatial engineering, hed already crossed the gap between abstract and practical knowledge, but he knew almost nothing about investing-having never invested in more than a mutual fund before joining the bank as a junior quant. Eager to learn, Carl rotated across five desks-commodities, equities, credit derivatives, interest rates, and foreign exchange-each with its distinct challenges. ? Although these rotations deepened his understanding of the markets, they came at a cost. Uncertainty, as envisioned by Knight (1964), plagued him. Carl couldnt assign probabilities of career success to any of the desks at which hed been learning. Nor was he sure that these desks spanned the space of attractive career options (Langlois and Cosgel 1993). Unlike risk, which he could quantify, career uncertainty seemed unsolvable. Carl was hounded by multiple unknowns, including how to build an identity that fit in the banks complex ecosystem. ? Carl found shelter from this uncertainty by committing to the global commodities desk. In time, Carl carved out an elite role in the group. His role required ongoing interaction with the desks buyers, the traders whose gains hinged on Carls models. Carl became the key player, the trusted go-to quant whenever anomalous fluctuations on a traders screen called for interpretation. ? Maintaining this trust, however, brought new, unanticipated costs. What began as a frontier for Carls career gradually became an overpowering regimen (White 1981b: 3). Intense consultations, late-night calls, and weekly meetings seemed unending. His deep knowledge of the models hed built meant others leaned solely on him. Importantly, in weekly meetings with fellow quants and the traders, Carl also had to talk the most: Carl held the hot-seat role, which required time-consuming preparation (White 1981). ? Lower-status, less-talkative members of Carls group had a different reality. Although the desk had a handful of other quants-six specialists covering markets as diverse as energy, metals, and agricultural products-none shouldered the weight of Carls responsibility. These other quants also expected him to live up to his role, further nudging him into an arduous working style. Their expectations, together with Carls toil, entrenched him in his role (Leifer and White 1987). ? Traders expectations of Carl only compounded his sense of entrapment. They also expected him to remain the expert. And, much to Carls consternation, the value traders derived from his expertise effectively denied him luxuries enjoyed by junior and mid-level quants. They, unlike Carl, were given chances to engage in lower-stakes, exploratory initiatives, framed as slack time (Bothner, Podolny, and Smith 2011). Safely distant from Carls hot-seat, they could learn, experiment, and problem-solve with relative freedom. ? For Carl, their comparative autonomy and lighter workloads accentuated the constraints of his role. He longed for the latitude they enjoyed. It was a painful revelation: his nomadic wanderings were long gone. The irony was tangible-like Sofia, who found herself hindered by a team culture of her own making, Carls pursuit of certainty and identity had stripped him of the freedom that marked the start of his career. ? Autonomy by Annealing Keen to break a suffocating structure, Carl chose to emulate a sword maker reshaping metal in a fire. He considered ways to disrupt the other quants. First, he contemplated a ratchet effect-drastically reduce their window for responding to traders on-going questions from three days to just one. Second, he imagined forcing his team to boost the banks league-table rankings in the Asian commodities markets from ninth to fifth in only a year. Both methods could raise the systems temperature-in search of a better configuration-but each had drawbacks: Reducing response-times could destroy work quality, and mandating utopian mobility in the league tables might break the teams spirit. ? Ultimately, Carl decided on a third method of annealing: role reshuffling. In a weekly meeting with the traders, Carl surprised the other quants: Tess, youre no longer our only energy expert. And Blake, you can stop hiding in agriculture. Starting today, youll switch roles: Tess, youll handle the ags questions, and Blake youll take the questions on energy. You two will start us off, and well go from there-reshuffling more of you each week. It wont be pretty, but youll find your way. ? Carl raised the temperature further: And this isnt just some exercise. Youll need to prove this is causing a difference for our traders. Each week, well hear updates on how your cross-training has improved their positions. Carl had injected a controlled dose of uncertainty, actively making [the ] system worse off in an effort to let it right itself (Leifer and White 1986: 240). ? Complacency in turn gave way to optimistic panic. Junior and mid-level quants saw that the slow-moving exploration theyd enjoyed as a perk was crowded out by this shock. Similar to the process of physical annealing, where heating disrupts a materials structure to release stress and raise durability, Carls approach disordered familiar routines to foster new, stronger bonds. New conversations began of necessity, but soon took on a momentum of their own. Competition in the team stayed largely productive, rarely veering into rash risk-taking (Bothner, Kang, and Stuart 2007) or destructive conflict (Piezunka et al. 2018a). Carl monitored the interactions, occasionally intervening, to prevent backstabbing and wining-by-making-others-lose. He knew that without careful modulation, the intensity of his approach could push his colleagues past their resilience thresholds. Carl was prompting new, productive interactions unimaginable in the prior structure.? In the ensuing weeks, Carl saw more change, welcoming all effects of his approach. While Jake, the lowest-status quant, broke down and resigned under Carls pressure, most quants were generatively resilient (Grandori 2020; Shipilov et al. 2024). Jakes reliance on a narrow, predictable role left him unprepared for Carls reshuffling. Jake floundered under the domain-changes, heightened scrutiny, and threat of obsolescence. In contrast, most others adapted, seeing the disruption as a chance to build new connections and skills. ? Tess and Blake, for instance, both shared insights that blurred boundaries between their specialized roles and engaged colleagues outside the group, making their networks more robust (Bothner, Smith, and White 2010). In addition, the traders, drawn to the desks upsurge in emotional energy (Collins and McConnell 2015), shifted from narrow questions to playful dialogue with the quants. Untethered to past dynamics, traders and quants engaged each other in ways more suited to the volatile and complex markets in which the bank traded. Traders increased performance signaled that Carls strategy was working. Importantly for Carl, he was no longer the lonely guardian of expert knowledge; he enjoyed greater freedom in a better terrain.? Satisfied by these changes, Carl initiated a cooling phase. He retained the role reshuffling, but slowed its pace to avoid burnout (cf. Est?vez-Mujica and Quintane 2018). Carls choice to guard his colleagues stamina in turn preserved his credibility with them. Carl sensed that ongoing cycles of heating and cooling-possible in a laboratory, with inanimate metal or glass-couldnt work here (Leifer and White 1986), so he pursued stability. Colleagues responded well. They stayed nimble-aware of Carls willingness to start an occasional fire so that existing patterns of interlocking coalitions could dissolve and form anew (Eccles and Nohria 1992: 200). Carl also fared better, having reclaimed a vital part of his professional identity-marked by autonomy and latitude to explore, anchored in the group hed reshaped. ? Network Reach Carls process of heating and cooling raised the welfare of many, though not all. Whereas Jake had broken like brittle glass, Sam did survive, but he was worse off. Carls controlled disorder, as some called it, left Sam with an uneasy mix of hope and dread. ? Sams problems began before the annealing occurred. Sams skills had always been domain-agnostic. His peers, Tess in agriculture and Blake in energy, were known holders of distinct roles-safely separated, long before Carl broke the structure. Sam, however, was always a techie in limbo-a translator whose work held value, but wasnt status-generating. He turned intricate instructions into high-quality code, yet his contributions, though vital, were seen as ancillary. Having never mastered a substantive domain, Sam suffered acutely when Carl reshuffled the roles. Sam was already marginal, and Carls annealing pushed him further to the periphery. ? Desperate, Sam expanded his network outside Carls group (White, Godart, and Corona 2007; White 2008) venturing beyond the global commodities desk into other tribes. He found his chance in casual conversations with peers on the rates and Forex desks, where news of unmet needs made him curious. ? Reaching up to Rick, head of the Forex desk, was high-risk, however. At the bank, the rule was clear: Time is money. Juniors didnt engage seniors without offering something of substantial value. Sam knew his proposal to help the Forex desk solve their technical issue was a gamble-and could be seen by Carl as a betrayal. Yet, Sam hoped that breaching the norms, if successful, would get coded not as foolish, but as courageous, catalyzing an upward status spiral (Bothner et al. 2010; Askin, Bothner, and Lee 2015; Piezunka et al. 2018b). So, Sam offered his skills to bridge the gap.? Sam also drew on his shared origins with Rick. Their mutual roots in San Francisco and love for the Golden State Warriors gave Sam an entry point. Casual nods to Steph Currys latest feats lightened their conversations and built trust (Schmitt and Fuhse 2015). Sams West Coast references thus smoothed the flow of his discussions with Rick, allowing for fresh starts in moments of awkwardness (Bearman 2005: 158), and retaining Ricks openness to his ideas. ? Sams network expansion also took him in other, less likely directions. Sam reached into the middle and back offices for information. These teams, invisible to most of the front-line quants, held insights on resource allocation and firm-wide risk-trends that Sam used to strengthen his pitch. But collaborating with them was risky-at the edge of whats appropriate for someone in his role. If caught, some of Sams colleagues would accuse him of slumming (Zuckerman and Kim 2003). Sam faced into this risk, preparing to frame his network reach as agentic and valuable. Sam then used what he learned from the middle and back offices to contextualize his pitch to Rick. ? When Sam finally laid out his findings to Rick, the human connection proved decisive. Shared Warriors fandom had protected and energized their conversations. A mix of courage, shared stories, and technical insight-together with an ability to frame his solution in context-helped Sam craft a new identity. No longer a domain-agnostic techie, Sam had risen from backstage contributor to front stage collaborator, recasting his identity by crossing taken-for-granted boundaries (Azarian 2005). ? Blocked Action Skye was the star scientist of the banks elite innovation lab. Under her leadership, the lab caused multiple breakthroughs, including satellite-based models of oceanic supply chains. Money poured into the bank, fueling its growth and solidifying the labs status. Colleagues in (and beyond) the lab revered Skyes genius, but their expectations also tied her to a narrow role. Skye wanted a broader role closer to the markets. Shed grown weary of inventing the things that others monetized. Yet, she saw no way out.? Cohesion was both the labs main strength and Skyes source of entrapment. The labs buyers-desk heads throughout the bank, as well as managing directors-valued Skyes colleagues more as a unified team than as individuals (White 1981: 523, eq. 3; Bothner and White 2001: 188, eq. 4). Celebrating this cohesion contributed to the labs success but also tightened Skyes bonds to the group, leaving her feeling indispensable yet constrained. Even in this dense network, Skye was the linchpin, making any attempt on her part to step back or reshape her role seem hazardous, for multiple parties. The thought of her moving incited fear in her peers and especially in her bosses, who worried about destabilizing the labs culture. ? Concern over Skyes potential exit was heightened by the banks dependence on her lab. The banks leadership knew no other team could replicate what her lab did, leading to relentless demand (White 2002: 132, 135) for their contributions. There was no let-up. Skye came to believe that she had to stay.? Skyes distinct role within the lab further tightened the vice. Known as a quiet sage, she was valued for her insightful, empathetic approach. This label reinforced her status, but it also brought a cost: She often felt more an observer than a true driver of innovation. Skye even wondered if her style bordered on the ruinous empathy called out by Sofia at the town hall: Listening and guiding was eclipsing leading and acting. ? In Skyes lab, unlike Carls, speaking time and status varied inversely. Colleagues who spoke less had more status (White 2002), solidifying Skyes role as a reserved linchpin. This pattern kept her from taking a more assertive role, one where she could actively steer initiatives toward profitable execution. Even as the key player in her lab, she felt nudged into passivity-motivated to maintain the balance the lab needed, while limiting her ability to act.? Managing directors efforts to block Skyes movements outside the lab made things even worse. The banks leadership masked her true contributions by funneling the outcomes of her work into different trading desks and presenting only aggregated financials. This hazy obfuscation (DiMaggio 1991; White 2008: 2011) made it impossible for her to know the financial impact of her ideas. Skyes bosses also leveraged status incentives, such as opportunities to publish and give lectures, to placate Skye and her colleagues, further blocking opportunities for entrepreneurial action. Through obfuscation and status-conferral, they sought to regulate Skye, ensuring they kept control over monetizing innovative ideas, giving Skye recognition rather than financial rewards.? Gaining Control Skyes attempts at control began with a re-imagination of her network (Collins 2005: x). She wanted more than the elite but limited exploratory role with which shed grown familiar. Skye wanted an ambidextrous role built on integrating the explorations from her lab with the exploitation occurring on the trading floor. Her ambitions also forced her to confront hard tensions between the petri dish role shed long played in her lab and the demands of a new rainmaker role among the banks exploiters. ? Her first act was to decouple: She adopted a stance of benign neglect (Piezunka et al. 2018c) toward her long-standing scientific colleagues. This was difficult at first, but strategically necessary. It freed her to build relationships with the banks exploiters-those known for taking her ideas from conception to execution. For inspiration, Skye also connected with the banks few renegades, the hedge fund originators, who worked outside the banks silos and got great joy in pricking the balloons of bureaucracy (Bartlett and Rangan 1992: 12). ? Learning the language of exploitation was also crucial. To succeed, Skye needed fluency in the jargon (Burt and Reagans 2022) of traders, structurers, portfolio managers, and sales team members-those whod long controlled the implementation of her labs creations. In absorbing their language, Skye was preparing to bring her creative insights into the world of capital, increasingly characterizing herself-to herself and to others-as dual-skilled. This required her to cast off her earlier identity as a conduit, passing ideas onward, and take on a broader, risk-laden vision of end-to-end innovation and execution. This investment of energy and time was not without risks: Skye knew that moving toward ambidexterity could disrupt established norms and invite resistance from those who had profited from her entrenchment in the lab. ? Skyes most practical step was to begin mobilizing the resources, human and financial, for her own her own internal hedge fund-a proprietary vehicle that would operate within the banks infrastructure. She envisioned this as a hybrid venture, allowing her to manage both the ideation and the strategic application of high-potential concepts, merging R&D with implementation. This model would thus let her influence both creative and financial aspects, positioning her as a central figure who could navigate the banks dual needs for innovation and profitability. Skye further envisioned the fund a testing ground for her ideas, ensuring that successful initiatives got executed end-to-end without others hijacking them-granting her control over process and outcomes.? Skye also used the rhetorical tool of prolepsis (White 2008: 282; Emirbayer and Mische 1998) to reinforce her new direction and strategic network (Godart and White 2010). She spoke of her hedge fund and its future initiatives as if they were already unfolding: As we roll out this next phase...- conveying her vision with immediacy and confidence. Skyes forward-looking language altered perceptions among her peers, reframing her transition as an expected and necessary step forward. By doing so, Skye was not only asserting her dual-skilled identity but also presenting herself persuasively as a leader who could bridge the conceptual and operational domains, showing that her evolution was not reckless meandering but a wise extension of her long-standing expertise. ? Conclusion: Three Topics for Future Research Whites initial (1992) version of Identity and Control concluded with 100 topics, many cast as probing questions for extending the theory. Inspired by this approach, while valuing parsimony, we close with three questions.? First, how do leaders, like Sofia and Carl, navigate high-stakes encounters by switching conversational frames that mix confidence and humility? Which network mechanisms determine if their tactics are seen as adaptive leadership or veer off the road into the extreme of arrogance or of fear? The German word Graben-meaning both ditch and grave-captures the consequences of a misstep in this balancing act, leading to social death (cf. Patterson 1982), the most severe form of entrapment. While Sofia found a suitable balance of confidence and humility, the outcome could have been different. Investigating the network precursors to this figurative mortality, as well as the strategies leaders take to maintain equilibrium, strikes us as important for future research. ? Second, how does Carls practice of annealing diverge from other organizational strategies, and what preconditions enable it to realign a social system successfully? Unlike standard organizational transformations, where the end goal is clear but methods are ambiguous, Carls approach demanded that even the destination be discovered through systemic disruption. Annealing, unlike bullying, seeks system-wide benefits rather than (persistent) individual dominance (cf. Bothner et al. 2022). However, conflating the two is possible, making it vital to consider what conditions retain the integrity of annealing without blunting its force. Premature cooling (consider a lax drill sergeant) undermines Whites vision, while excessive heating can erode the annealers status, especially among already-strained colleagues. The human toll-not unlike shattered glass-can be studied. Differentiating successful from failed annealing is an interesting and important topic. ? Third, what role do initial status differences play in shaping how individuals reshape their professional identities? For Sam, low status required a strategy of personal connection and trust-building to shift from the periphery to influence. This groundwork altered his network ties and raised his status. Conversely, Skyes higher status allowed her to leverage proleptic language, projecting her strategic transition as inevitable and drawing on her existing credibility. Skye moved with less friction than did Sam. Their contrasting paths underscore the importance of considering how status informs whether strategies hinge on humanizing discourse or projective rhetoric. Insights into these dynamics can illuminate how leaders at various levels of status escape entrapment. ? 1 Our cases are composite sketches. Our starting point in generating these cases was a multi-year study of Whites publications and of those of other authors influenced by his work. This study began for the first author during his graduate studies in the 1990s. Taking this study as our foundation, we conducted several semi-structured interviews of the second author, who worked for a global investment bank from 2006 through 2011. We next used a large language model to organize and convert qualitative accounts of the second authors experiences and observations (and those of the author team more broadly) into rough drafts of our cases. These drafts were the basis for the resulting, composite sketches that we then crafted to reflect Whites ideas in a managerial context.

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INSIGHT SET 1

GENERAL CONTEXT:

Harrison C. White discusses the social construction of markets and the roles of firms within these markets. He analyzes how producers interact and observe one another to sustain market structures, including various kinds of market failures.

RELEVANCE:

This context illuminates how the arguments made in the paper resonate with White's theories, offering a foundation for exploring autonomy in professional managerial relationships.

EXTRACTED QUOTES:

QUOTE 1:

Text: Markets are self-reproducing social structures among specific cliques of firms and other actors who evolve roles from observations of each other's behavior.

Context: White describes the interaction between firms in a market.

Position: Page 3, Paragraph 2

Relevance: This quote emphasizes the role of social structures in professional environments, supporting the claim that network ties can become binding constraints.

QUOTE 2:

Text: Each producer acts purely on self-interest based on observed actions of all others, summarized through a feedback process.

Context: White illustrates how producers respond to one another in the market.

Position: Page 5, Line 10

Relevance: This insight supports the notion that individuals can navigate and reshape their roles through careful observation and interaction, which is crucial to regaining autonomy.

QUOTE 3:

Text: In my view, firms seek niches in a market in much the same way as organisms seek niches in an ecology.

Context: Discussion of feedback mechanisms within marketplaces.

Position: Page 11, Paragraph 3

Relevance: This metaphor underlines the fluidity of roles and niches in professional settings, reinforcing that autonomy can be reshaped through active engagement with one's environment.

QUOTE 4:

Text: Markets are defined by self-reproducing cliques of firms, and not the other way around.

Context: Explaining market construction.

Position: Page 12, Line 21

Relevance: This quote supports the argument that the structure of relationships in a managerial context can crystallize into constraints, which individuals must navigate to enhance their autonomy.

QUOTE 5:

Text: Pressure from the buyer side creates a mirror in which producers see themselves, not consumers.

Context: On the nature of role obligations and market dynamics.

Position: Page 13, Paragraph 2

Relevance: This perspective highlights how individuals in managerial networks must also navigate perceptions from their peers, linking to the mechanisms of autonomy reclamation discussed in the draft.

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