Several aspects of roles and relationships stand out. First, the presence or absence of a leader on racial and cultural issues is important, someone who was both willing to spearhead raising these issues and was seen by others as a resource. Second, we focus on the role of the team leader as either facilitator or suppressor of learning and safety more generally as well as of conversations related to race and ethnicity. Third, we identify other team members who seem to carry particular weight on the team that would affect its racial-cultural practice on the team’s dynamics. Finally, regarding relationships, we highlight the team’s overall cohesion and connection among group members, or lack of them. We describe the roles and relationships for each team below.

Figure 7.1 is a graphic depiction of our argument. The model may be deceptive in its simplicity. We know that teams or work groups are messy entities impossible to reduce to a set of boxes and arrows. However, we deliberately make the model as parsimonious as possible to better highlight the key characteristics that we believe make a difference. Moreover, the model suggests something of a linear relationship, but in reality it is difficult to identify what comes first and what comes later. We see each team’s approach to addressing race and ethnicity as fully bound up with other team dynamics; its forthrightness or fear in addressing race and ethnicity would have a feedback loop affecting the team’s larger sense of safety and learning as well as its roles and relationships.

**Team North**

Most of Team North’s members, white and of color, brought not only interest in, but also knowledge and awareness of, race and culture to their work. As such, each carried out her or his own color-conscious way of working. These individual approaches were positioned in a largely constructive environment—
ment with significant tension, including intergroup tension, and therefore a distinct lack of safety, especially as related to relations among racial and ethnic groups. Some psychoanalytic theorists would suggest an insufficient holding environment in which workers could try out new behaviors and ways of being while still being supported. We have a pernicious team context as well: not only was the team unable to learn more generally, several members stated they felt some lack of safety, including two who suggested a lack of identity safety.

This incubator acted on the individuals in the team to create Team East’s unique set of roles and relationships that ultimately led to a color-evasive team practice. Both Pilar, the Puerto Rican team leader, and Debbie, the white team manager, played important roles. The overall relationships on the team could be best described as polarized and schismatic.

Pilar as team leader probably had the most impact on the team’s dynamics. As the team’s formal leader and someone devoted to issues related to race and culture, she would have been the likely instigator of team-level conversations, but she was so disliked and mistrusted by the team members that this was impossible. In fact, Pilar could be characterized as a failed leader: she saw herself as a model and teacher of how to attend to these issues, but the team never granted her that authority. Debbie, Pilar’s direct superior, seemingly color cognizant, never encouraged such conversations in team meetings nor participated in them when they did occur. She was a nonleader in this arena.
It’s important to point out that regardless of Pilar’s and Debbie’s approaches, it would have been very difficult to broach racial or ethnic topics, given the office context. Home to an ugly racist incident not long before the teaming pilot began, the office continued to experience racial tension, including charges of racial favoritism.

The team’s lack of discussion, though, was also related to the overall set of relationships on the team. The group was characterized not by cohesion but by polarization and schism, anchored by the gulf between the team members and Pilar. With such a divide, the team stagnated; it could not resolve conflict or move forward. Given this atmosphere, there was no incentive for the team to investigate territory, like race and ethnicity, which could create more conflict. If it could avoid a potential source of conflict, it would—leading to a color-evasive practice.

In sum, it may not be so paradoxical that, in Team East, we have a group of color-conscious individuals who created a team practice that was largely color blind. In fact, given the team and office climate, the surprise may be that they ever mentioned it at all. (For a graphic summary of this argument, see figure 7.3.)

**Team South**

Team South brings a unique positioning. Team East held the seeds for color-cognizant practice in that most of their members were interested and knowledgeable; they just needed the right incubator. But Team South would have to undergo a major transformation for such an approach to bloom.
mentally similar. This seemed to include Radhi as well—at least no one said anything about Radhi’s being less a part of the group, even though they could be critical of her. The team’s insistence on its closeness, however, likely made it impossible for Radhi or anyone else on the team to actually face their fissures. Ultimately, the group’s color hostility seems firmly rooted in its aggressive claims of internal cohesion: difference in any form was threatening, and racial or cultural difference especially so. (For a graphic summary of this argument, see figure 7.4.)

These models stand as summaries of the core characteristics of each team. Such summaries are fruitful for two reasons. First, they provide a clear picture of each team: they enhance our understanding of team dynamics and their relationship to each team’s racial-cultural practice. Second, they enable us to suggest points of attention and intervention as organizations consider how to develop more color-cognizant practice among their members and work units. Having created these models, though, we now want to complicate them. The teams, as well as members on each team, harbored multiple inconsistencies that sometimes made the task of creating clear labels challenging. But just as those labels can be fruitful, contradictions can be too. We explore the generativity of contradiction in our next chapter.