

Being Black—but Not Too Black—in the Workplace

Being a person of color at a predominantly white workplace creates its own special kinds of stress.

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To be a black professional is often to be alone. Most black doctors, lawyers, journalists, and so on—those in white-collar positions that require specialized training and credentialing—work in environments where they are in the racial minority.

This comes with challenges. Beyond outright discrimination, which many still face, there are psychological costs to being one of just a few black

faces in a predominantly white environment. In a study of black professional workers in a number of different occupations, I found that these employees worked to carefully manage their emotions in ways that reflected the racial landscapes they inhabited.

In particular, black professionals had to be very careful to show feelings of conviviality and pleasantness, even—especially—in response to racial issues. They felt that emotions of anger, frustration, and annoyance were discouraged, even when they worked in settings where these emotions were generally welcomed in certain contexts—think litigators interacting with opposing counsel, or financial analysts responding to a stressful day on Wall Street.

Interestingly, this often played out at trainings meant to encourage racial sensitivity. Many of the black professionals I interviewed found that diversity trainings—intended to improve the work environment for minorities—actually became a source of emotional stress, as they perceived that their white colleagues could use these trainings to express negative emotions about people of color, but that they were expected not to disclose their own honest emotional reactions to such statements.

One of the most interesting recent contributions to this area of research comes from legal scholars Mitu Gulati and Devon Carbado. In their book *Working Identity*, they argue that while everyone needs to create and put forth an “appropriate” workplace identity, for members of minority groups—women of all races, racial-minority men, LGBTQ people—this becomes particularly taxing because their working identities must counter common cultural stereotypes. For example, black men may feel compelled to work longer hours as a way to repudiate stereotypes of a poor work ethic among blacks. To make matters more complicated, such strategies can backfire, reinforcing other stereotypes: Working those long hours may lead

colleagues to assume that the workers lack the intellectual preparation needed for high-status professional jobs.

Carbado and Gulati also note that minority professionals tread cautiously to avoid upsetting the majority group's sensibilities. Put simply, they can be visibly black, but don't want to be perceived as stereotypically black. As Carbado and Gulati write, a black female candidate for a law firm who chemically straightens her hair, is in a nuclear family structure, and resides in a predominantly white neighborhood signals a fealty to (often unspoken) racial norms. She does so in a way that an equally qualified black woman candidate who wears dreadlocks, has a history of pushing for racial change in the legal field, is a single mother, and lives in the inner city does not.

The same is true for professional workers who are members of other racial minority groups. For instance, Latina attorneys may be able to advance further at work if they take pains not to speak with any trace of an accent. These are challenges in addition to the more well-known ones—the difficulties finding mentors of the same race, coping with racial stereotypes, being treated as a representative for one's entire racial group.

So what does this mean for black workers in professional environments? First, it's indicative of the degree to which race shapes occupational outcomes. In many circles, people feel more comfortable reducing racial issues to class-based ones, assuming that poverty explains much, if not all, of the differences between minorities and whites.

But for blacks in professional positions, issues of poverty are not the problem. Poverty does not explain biases in hiring, the need for particular types of emotional management, and the careful self-presentation that minority professionals engage in at work.

Second, all of this ought to encourage a rethinking of some of the existing efforts to create more diverse work environments. Do diversity and inclusion initiatives take into consideration how minorities placed in those environments feel? How can policies create not just more equitable hiring processes, but address the emotional toll of being a racial minority in a professional work setting?

In the current political climate, there is generally support for solving race-related employment challenges by focusing on job training and education—in other words, increasing human capital to improve access. Given the research, it's also important to consider how to create better workplaces for the minority professionals who are already in these jobs.

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