Investigating the Implications of Code-Switching and Assimilating at Work for African American Professionals

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The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences Black Professionals face assimilating to majority cultural norms. Through analysis of qualitative data of 14 one-hour interviews of Black People employed at the director+ level, this study examined the experiences of assimilating and the impact on overall well-being of Black People in the American Workplace. The results indicated the workplace does not encourage Black People to truly bring their full selves to work. Implications for practice include considering cultural and lifestyle norms of minorities in the workplace as organizations continue their efforts to encourage their employees to bring their full selves to work. Limitations, practical applications, and future research areas are also discussed.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, psychological safety, covering, code-switching

INTRODUCTION

Organizations have moved towards encouraging employees to be authentic in the workplace or bring their full self to work. Behaviors deemed as acceptable in the workplace have been created or framed from a non-minority lens. It is not known if the call to bring one's full-self to work accommodates cultural norms found in minority communities or allows for minorities to bring their full, authentic self to work. This qualitative study utilized 14 1-hour interviews of Black People employed at the director+ level to learn about the experience of minorities as they attempt to bring their full-self to work or conversely, assimilate. Our findings indicate the workplace does not accommodate Black People truly bringing their full-self to work resulting in Black employees assimilating to majority cultural norms in work settings. This mismatch between being true to oneself vs assimilation negatively impacts the overall well-being of Black People in the American Workplace. Implication for practice include considering cultural and lifestyle norms of minorities in the workplaces as organizations champion bringing one's full self to work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The death of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department on May 25, 2020, combined with the global pandemic has unearthed and exacerbated structural and systemic racism that impacts marginalized groups of people. In response, organizations have acted towards building diverse and inclusive cultures where minority employees can thrive. The purpose of this piece of work is to shine the light on the day-to-day experiences of marginalized people in the workplace. The authors hope to provide organizations with insight needed to build cultures that help employees feel psychologically safe enough to being authentic or bring their full selves to work.

Authenticity and Psychological Safety at Work

Authenticity at work is the degree to which an employee's values, beliefs, and characteristics align with their work environment (Harter, 2002). Authenticity is a tripartite structure involving alignment between true self and conscious awareness (self-alienation), expressing emotions and engaging in behaviors consistent with how an individual thinks, beliefs, and feels (authentic living), and the influence various environments have on an individual's behavior (social influence) (Wood et al, 2008). Authenticity is a state rather than a trait varying according to work culture, environment, or role (Fleeson and Wilt, 2010). An employee's workplace culture or environment impacts their willingness to be authentic at work.

When employees feel psychologically safe, they feel empowered to express an idea or contribute fully and be truly who they are, without fear of negative consequences to themselves, their status or their career (Kahn, 1990). In Brown's (2012) work, the author mentions vulnerability to own one's own mistakes before turning them into learning requires courage and trust that their surroundings will not shame them for doing so. When employees feel psychologically safe at work, they are more inclined to bring their full selves to work.

Performance Outcomes of Authenticity and Psychological Safety

The ability to be authentic at work results in increased engagement, job satisfaction, performance, perceptions of belongingness, intentions to stay (Bettencourt and Sheldon, 2001), self-esteem, and gratitude (Wood et al, 2008). Inversely, well-being is negatively impacted when disparities exist between an employee's true self and who they are expected to be at work. Inability to be authentic at work also leads to false behavior or hiding of who one truly is. This leads to employees feeling inclined to say what others want to hear instead of sharing their true thoughts (Harter, 2002). Psychological Safety is a core success factor to high performance as it leads to untapped creative potential, increased broad contributions and results in more innovative solutions (Edmondson and Lei, 2014).

Authenticity at Work & Minorities

Employees belonging to a sub-group with less than 15% of the population present in the workplace are "tokens" (Kanter, 1977). Research focused on tokens in the workplace have found tokens report experiences of vulnerability, distinctiveness, and loss of self-confidence (Neimann & Dovidio, 1998). Feelings of distinctiveness can arouse stereotype threat and directly contribute towards being inauthentic or engaging in false behaviors at work. Engaging in false behaviors occurs when people adjust their natural behaviors in order to conform to the cultural stereotypes found in the dominant group, even if conforming has an impact on performance (Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003). Conforming, being inauthentic at work, or engaging in false behaviors exist to eliminate perceived workplace threats. The perceived and actual discrimination includes being ostracized, not being promoted, not being hired, being harassed, or taunted, having job assignments impacted, or being terminated (Baker and Lucas, 2017).

Past research gives support for conforming behaviors. A research study examining hiring interview results found Black and Hispanic candidates tend to be viewed less favorably in comparison to other groups (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998). In some cases, discrimination during interview processes appear to be absent but the hiring interviewer is less friendly with minority candidates. This results in decreased minority performance in the interview leading to not being hired (Hebl et al, 2002). To resolve this, Black and

Hispanic candidates are more likely than other groups to code switch during the interview process or engage in other behaviors to signify in-group affiliation. Code switching involves a bilingual speaker deciding to speak one language over another. Black English is a full-fledged linguistic system recognized by linguists. Code switching for Black people in the workplace involves switching from Black English to Standard English given the environment (Koch et al, 2001).

Past research also illustrates the support for conforming behaviors for other protected groups. Regarding members of the LGBTQ+ community, employees who identify as "out", still tone down aspects of themselves that are not fully tolerated to fit in or avoid discrimination at work (Yoshino, 2006). Additionally, people tend to favor members of their own group more than others. The more a minority can illustrate in-group belongingness, the greater increase in favorable outcomes and decreased risk of discrimination (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Facilitating Authenticity at Work

When members of one racial group (Group A) have had limited relationship building interactions with members from another group (Group B), Group A members will default to perceiving Group B members in stereotypical ways to make up for the lack of information (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). One way to mitigate this is by creating opportunities to bring people from various backgrounds together to work towards a common goal. Working together to achieve similar goals helps people in the workplace recategorize one another from out-group to in-group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Cross-group collaboration decreases bias and discrimination by helping individuals decategorize each other. When focus is placed on individual unique qualities rather than group membership members of each group see each other as unique individuals rather than people belonging to a group (Miller, 2002).

Employee resource groups can easily be positioned to foster cross-group collaboration in pursuit of a common goal. (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). To do so, it is important for ERG messaging to communicate that all who support the group are allowed to join regardless of direct membership in the group. ERG's strictly consisting of members with similar identities and excluding others from different identities results in increased in-group inclusion but overall exclusion. Additionally, ERG's create opportunities for cooperative interaction and the building of personal relationships among members.

Authenticity is not a quality others can attribute to a person nor is it easily viewed in the workplace. Being seen as "acting authentic" is in direct opposition to the definition of authenticity. An employee's own perception of their authenticity is a more accurate measure of authenticity than external assignment (Erickson, 1994). Therefore, the best way to measure authenticity is through self-evaluation or report.

This research examines phenomena experienced by marginalized people at work for the purpose of providing organizations with recommendations on building an inclusive work culture.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were solicited via the researcher's professional networks. To participate in this study the participants were required to identify as Black and currently or previously worked at the Director level. Participants industry experience included healthcare, finance, non-profit, tech, government, and academia. Researchers conducted one-hour interviews with each participant to gain perspectives on their early life, early career, and current career experiences.

Participants were asked a series of questions to understand their experiences with authenticity and assimilation at work as well as the implications for doing so over the course of their careers. A sample question includes "Do you feel like you have to suppress a portion of your identity to code switch at work?" Data analysis included reading through interview notes taken verbatim and grouping the answers based on themes that emerged from the findings.

Measures

A series of questions were developed to examine how Black Professionals learned to assimilate at work and the possible long-term implications of code switching. Participants were also asked questions to capture past work events that influence their views around the consequences of not assimilating at work. A full list of the questions is included in Appendix A.

RESULTS

Learned Behaviors

Participants reported learning how to behave in professional settings primarily from watching their other colleagues at work, followed by learning from a mentor, feedback or friends. Participants reported experiences when acting authentically often made others uncomfortable and caused them to feel obligated to alter their behaviors. One participant mentioned "There were a lot of unspoken rules that you had to follow as a minority. This was taught to me during my upbringing before I entered in the working world." Further, "I have to change to ease other's anxiety. People are afraid of us because they don't know who we are." Another participant mentioned "I tone down who I am a bit in order to melt into the space. I am not as extroverted or over the top". Further, "I felt like I had to be fake nice enough so that someone with a degree didn't feel offended by my presence. They were always telling me you need to change you need to change". Another participant stated "You learn how to talk their talk and walk their walk. It became clear that to be successful in HR, I had to learn to be indirect because it hurt their feelings. Being too direct is code for being too black." Overall participants reported needed to change their natural, authentic behaviors in order to have successful working relationships.

Code Switching

Participants reported learning changing their behavior made white people feel more comfortable around them. When white people were more comfortable around them, they were more inclined to open and get to know them. These personal relationships allowed them to be favorably viewed by others in the workplace. Being viewed favorably or as a "good one" by others in the workplace resulted in increased networking opportunities and subsequently promotions or new job opportunities.

Code switching can be viewed as a survival technique for Black People in the workplace. Code switching allows for the breaking of boundaries and sets the foundation for non-Black People feeling comfortable collaborating with Black People. One participant shared, "With new audiences I know I can't be loud, its intimidating. I have to suppress that. I am comfortable in myself, but I have to switch in order to make other people feel comfortable. If I know I am going to a place where people don't know me, I don't try to scare them too much. Sometimes I forget and people stop talking to me. I am over 6 feet tall."

Additionally, participants described code switching at work as adapting their speaking pattern, personality, and appearance. One participant described being cautious of her tone regardless of being excited or disappointed to mitigate being viewed as aggressive. Other respondents reported altering their style of dress or hair while in work settings. A participant described it as learning to not wear hairstyles that were "too black". Another participant described monitoring her behavior at work as to not been seen as "too black". She provided an example of being selected to dance at work, so she intentionally selected a "generic song" and danced in a "generic way" instead of what she naturally wanted to do.

Impact of Assimilation on Well-Being

Participants described being one way at work and another at home as being exhausting. They widely described assimilation as having a negative impact on their health, work experiences, and overall well-being. One participant described it as being "frustrating, saddening often. It made me want to leave the country, I'll tell you that."

Additionally, themes surrounding well-being reported by participants included experiencing anxiety, inability to sleep, relationships being negatively affected, feeling helpless, feeling exhausted, and experiencing self-doubt. Multiple respondents reported realizing the workplace was not meant for them to

bring their full self to work. As a result, they contemplated exit strategies including quitting their job. "It is constant. It is fatiguing, it wears you down daily. You come home so tired. Although I haven't been working out for three hours, my brain has been working for eight hours. I just want to come home and sit down and relax. It wears you out. I am retiring early because of that." "At best it just makes you feel tired I think that it manifests in some mental health concerns, because you can't be who you are or who you want to be."

Another theme emerged from participants fearing penal consequences for not assimilating or changing their behaviors to make white people feel comfortable. "When you are in the middle of figuring yourself out there is a fear you will be pushed aside. It is a survival technique. We don't get the choice we have to do this to survive." Further, "Assimilating means having an internal monologue before sending an email, and no one else has to do that. Code switching is the art of shrinking is a survival tool. You must make yourself as invisible as long as possible before you erupt into your full self. For me can I afford to code switching. The implications are the risk of losing income."

Bringing One's Full Self to Work

When participants were asked what it would mean to bring their full selves to work, they mentioned allocating less time and effort toward changing their behaviors and approaching work more authentically. One participant mentioned bringing their full self to work meant "having honest and robust conversations that have no hedging. I find my code switching is a lot of hedging 'you know I saw someone else do...' 'have you considered' rather than 'just do this'. Another participant mentioned, "It would look like having open, honest and true conversations in meetings, where there would be some serious talk about the "why, should, could, and how" we are doing stuff. We can have the heart to hearts with my best friends, we talk about what is wrong and right about us and we still love each other. We get it out, it can get heated, but we love each other. If I could be my true self, I would approach people that way.

DISCUSSION

Overall, participants shared a common desire to want to have similar conversations they typically have with close friends. In this safe place they can challenge each other and be vulnerable due to a shared sense of love and "wanting each other to win". They reported they wanted this space to be created at work but felt the shared understanding of love and support was not present and prevented workspaces from feeling safe. They shared, there is a serious missed opportunity for growth refinement to occur in their workplaces. For example, more effort and time is placed into their approach rather than dealing with the problem or poor performance and participants mentioned feeling if their approach was not fully accepted and adopted then the message around the issue would be lost.

Participants also reported a common theme of being able to build healthy working relationships with non-minorities in the workplace, once the individual saw them for who they really were.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this paper was to equip organizations with the knowledge of how current organizational system could be suppressing the voices and authenticity of their marginalized employees. The experiences shared by participants calls for more emphasis to be placed on encouraging ERG membership to non-target audiences. Alternatively, organizations should explore other ways to allow minorities and non-minorities to work together towards a common goal to aide in the non-minority employee seeing the minority employee as an individual. Organizations should also continue to relax standards associated with dress, hairstyle, and voice to encourage minorities bringing their full selves to work.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The qualitative research investigates the work experiences of Black People in American work settings. A small sample size of 14 participants limits the scope of this project. The sample alone fails to capture white working professionals' experiences along with other non-African American marginalized employees.

Further research should investigate the potential impact of code switching or assimilating to mental health and well-being of marginalized individuals. The findings of these qualitative interviews call for more research to determine if the same trends are present in larger populations.

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APPENDIX

1. Think back to your early career experiences, how did you learn what behaviors were acceptable and unacceptable at work?
   a. What messages did people send?
   b. With that new knowledge how did you assimilate?
   c. How did assimilating make you feel?
2. Looking back over your career, what would you say were the long-term effects of assimilating?
3. Over the course of your career how did you continue to add appropriate work behaviors to your repertoire?
4. Have you ever felt like the token minority person in a group, team or organization and what was that experience like?
5. Do you feel like you have to suppress a portion of your identity in order to code switch?
6. How do you identify an ally at work?
   a. Can you describe the impact of having an ally at work?
   b. Can you describe the impact of having a non-ally work?
7. Do you think minorities need to assimilate at work?
8. If you were to bring your full self to work, holding nothing about your identity back, what would that look like for you?
   a. What are the perceived implications of doing the above?

Tables

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS FOR PARTICIPANTS

		Count	%
Gender			
	Male	7	50%
	Female	7	50%
Ethnicity			
	Black/African American	14	100%
Industry			
	Academia	2	14%
	Distribution	2	14%
	Finance	1	7%
	Food & Beverage	1	7%
	Government	1	7%
	Healthcare	2	14%
	IT	1	7%
	Non-Profit	1	7%
	Tech	2	14%
	Telecommunication	1	7%

Industry Tenure			
< 5 years		0	0%
5 to 9.99 years		5	36%
10 to 15 YEARS		6	43%
15+ years		3	21%

TABLE 2
QUALITATIVE THEMES AND RESPONSE EXAMPLES FOR QUESTION: "THINK BACK TO YOUR EARLY CAREER EXPERIENCES, HOW DID YOU LEARN WHAT BEHAVIORS WERE ACCEPTABLE AND UNACCEPTABLE AT WORK"?

Positive Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Learned from Watching Colleagues at Work	A lot of my early experiences came from being conscious about what was going on around me. I couldn't disrupt too much. I didn't confront people in a way that created anxiety on their part.	7
Learned from a Mentor	Having a mentor, people underestimate that. You have to have someone who has been there, done that and can help you navigate your way to where you want to go.	6
Learned from Leader or Redirecting Feedback	I would get feedback from my managers	5
Learned from Friends	I would have conversations with friends	5
Learned from Positive Affirmations from Colleagues	Through positive affirmation, like "you are so articulate"	4
Learned from Other Black Professionals (non-coworkers)	I learned how to assimilate more authentically after joining a professional organization focused on African Americans. I discovered we all shared similar stories and experiences	4
Learned from Family	There were a lot of unspoken rules that you had to follow as a minority. Your family breaks it down like "this is going to happen, and this is how you respond".	3
Learned from College Campus Career Services	Career services meetings on campus helped prepared me for the basic things	3
Learned from Pop Culture	Shows like the Cosby show and Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, you have families that for the most part displayed this kind of behavior that would be acceptable workplace behavior.	2
Employee Training	Back then we had employee training	2
Learned from a Coach	They made me go to a coach so that my behavior would align with the company	1

Negative Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Learned from Being Talked About	People would look at me or I would see them whispering	6
Learned from Microaggressions	Looking at how the white teachers treated us differently taught me how to behave and speak	5
Learned from Feeling Different from Others	I went on a zoom call wearing an Afro. I was the only one who looked like me. I felt different. I felt odd. I put my braids back in the next day.	4

Being Reprimanded or Corrected by Superior	You learn how to talk their talk and walk their walk. I have always been direct. When I first started my career, I'd approach matters directly like in my personal life. It was made clear that to be successful, I had to learn to be indirect because it hurt their feelings	4
Learned from Passive Aggressiveness	You'll get comments like – 'those are cool,' 'those are neat'. It puts me on guard - its cool as in its uncommon for the workplace.	3
Learned from Watching Colleagues at Work	A lot of my early experiences came from being conscious about what was going on around me. I couldn't disrupt too much. I didn't confront people in a way that created anxiety on their part.	2
Learned from Behaviors of Others	I learned from other kids, even though I couldn't behave the way they behaved, but I learned from their behavior.	1

TABLE 3
QUALITATIVE THEMES AND RESPONSE EXAMPLES FOR QUESTION: "HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE THE TOKEN MINORITY PERSON IN A GROUP, TEAM OR ORGANIZATION AND WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE?"

Positive Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Served as a sole representative	Oftentimes, you feel like you're the sole representative for a race of people. I mean that literally - not just from the business perspective. People ask for your opinions as a representation of your people.	5
Viewed as by others as less capable	People watch you hoping you will make a mistake. Or they question how we got there	3
Adjusted personality to fit in	I had to dumb myself down to appear less hard to work with and get by.	3
Used for My Race	I was qualified for my role. However, they would never give me work or ask me to do anything unless they needed a black face to be present during a meeting	2

TABLE 4
QUALITATIVE THEMES AND RESPONSE EXAMPLES FOR QUESTION: "WHY DO YOU THINK MINORITIES ASSIMILATE AT WORK?"

Positive Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Due to stereotypes/ racism	The work place isn't ready to grapple with individuality	4
To blend in	We assimilate at work to not stand out.	3
Job security/promotion	It's part of survival whether it be job security or our safety on and off the workplace.	3
The "majority" dominate the corporate culture	The workplace was not made for us or with us in mind. We have to assimilate in order to access privileges.	3
To be more palatable	People are afraid of us because they don't know who we are.	2

TABLE 5
QUALITATIVE THEMES AND RESPONSE EXAMPLES FOR QUESTION: "WHAT IMPACT DID ASSIMILATING HAVE ON YOUR OVERALL WELL-BEING"

Negative Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Anxiety	Anxiety I've had public panic attacks. Someone who was more seasoned than me said that I was too ethnic, gave me anxiety	**5**
Exhaustion	I think the pressure of code-switching and assimilating behavior, for some people may be ok, but for some people at bare minimum has a weight to it. It makes you feel tired. Assimilating is exhausting and it changes you. I would say being emotionally exhausted because you're having to be one way when you're at work and one way when you're at home. I just want to watch dumb reality shows because I'm mentally exhausted from having to play different roles.	**5**
Self-Doubt	It made me question myself - it made me question whether or not that I could succeed.	4
Feeling Misunderstood	People take things differently than how you intended so it doesn't feel great.	4
Frustration	Very frustrating because I feel like I was raised well and imparted with good values and ethics. I worked really hard to get to where I'm at and to often be told you're not good enough or you can be better….it was frustrating, saddening often.	3
Stressful	It has been a bit stressful because you don't want to stay somewhere you aren't appreciated and it takes time to find another role.	3
Impacted Sleep	It definitely affected my sleep and I didn't know if someone was going to be at work and tell me you're not welcome. They were always telling me you need to change you need to change until I finally say I need to go.	2
Feeling Helpless	I felt as though there were racial undertones in every complaint and felt helpless.	2
Impacted Relationships	It affected my relationship with my girlfriend because I felt the time monopolized by talking about work related issues	2

TABLE 6
QUALITATIVE THEMES AND RESPONSE EXAMPLES FOR QUESTION: "HOW DID ASSIMILATING MAKE YOU FEEL? HOW DID IT IMPACT YOU?"

Negative Effect

Theme	Response Example	Frequency
Adapted Personality	You learn how to joke how they joke. I started to be fake nice I'll tone down a little bit of not being over the top or as extroverted and melting into the space	7
Changed Speaking Patterns including Tone	Being cautious of my tone, regardless if I am excited or disappointed. There is a stereotype of coming across as aggressive	5
Changed Style of Dress or Hair	I changed the way I dressed. You learn how to wear hairstyles that don't look too black.	4