

Being Your Authentic Self At Work: The Costs of Code Switching

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Objectives

- Define code-switching and identify ways and reasons it shows up in the workplace
- Recognize the personal, organizational, and societal costs of code-switching and the benefits of having workers show up as their authentic selves
- Identify steps that organizations can take to support workers showing up as their authentic selves



What is code switching?

Definition: “Broadly, code-switching involves adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities”
(McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019).

How do people
code switch at
work?

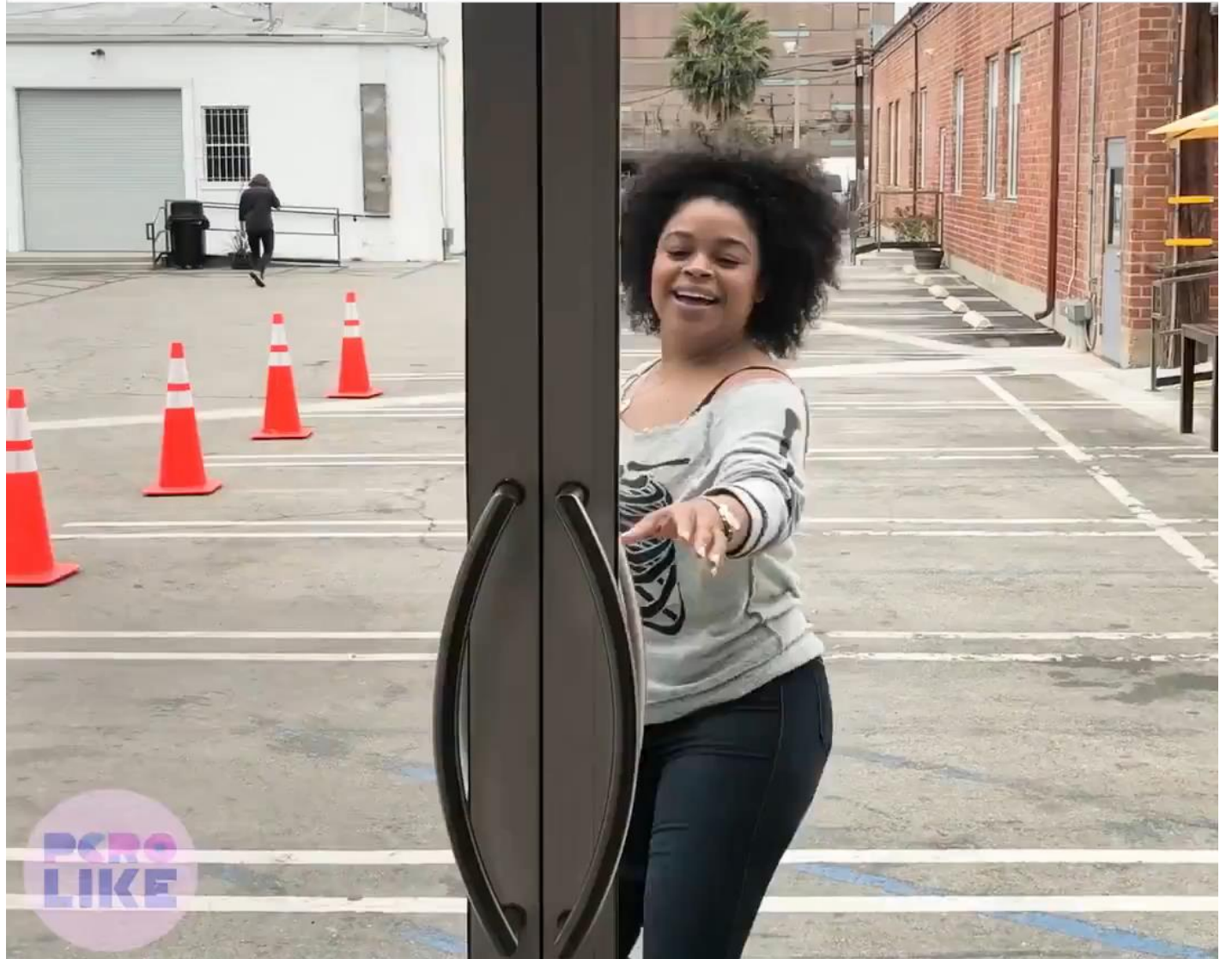
Physical Appearance:

For black professionals,
the most notable
modification made to
appearance is HAIR



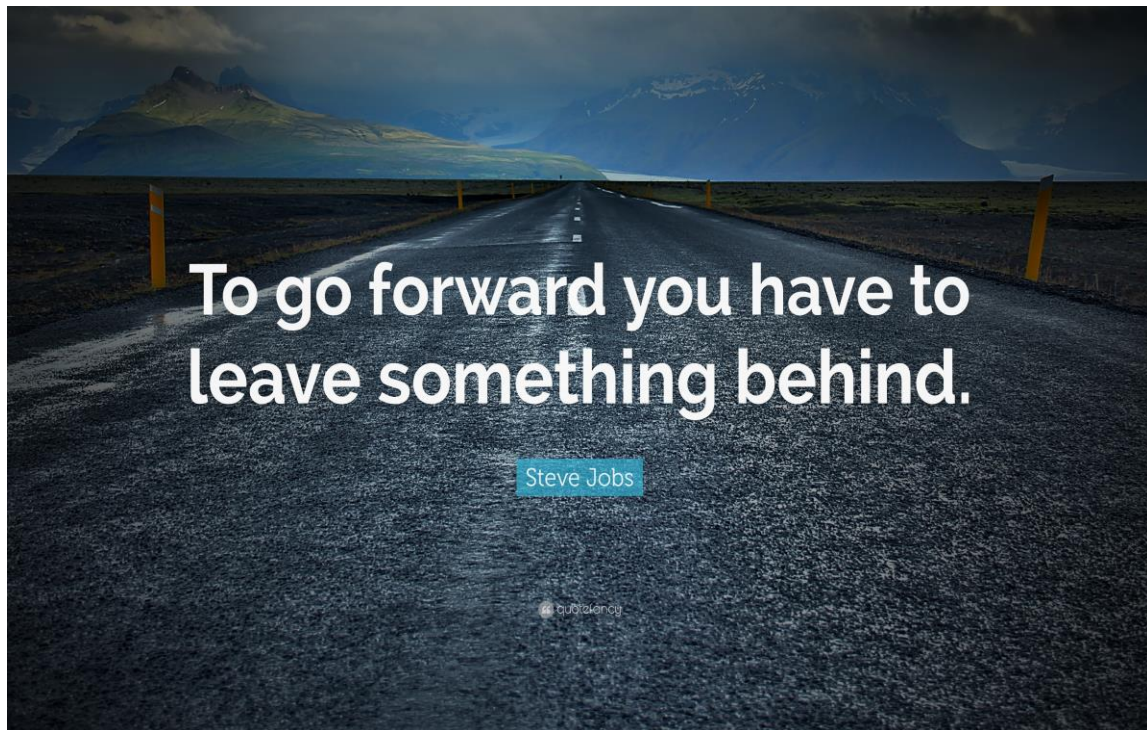
Language,
mannerisms,
physicality...

WHEN YOU CODE SWITCH AT WORK



Choosing easy
to pronounce
white sounding
nicknames...





From the research: Other code-switching behaviors, and why they happen...

- For black people and other racial minorities, downplaying membership in a stigmatized racial group helps increase perceptions of professionalism and the likelihood of being hired.
- Avoiding negative stereotypes associated with black racial identity (e.g., incompetence, laziness) *helps black employees be seen as leaders.*
- Expressing shared interests with members of dominant groups promotes similarity with powerful organizational members, which *raises the chance of promotions* because individuals tend to affiliate with people they perceive as similar.

(McCluney, et al, 2019)



Research Findings...

- **Leadership aspiration.** We found that black employees with high career aspirations for leadership and promotion opportunities actively avoided conforming to black stereotypes to a higher degree than those with low career aspirations.
- **“Fit” beyond race.** Black employees who perceived that they “fit” in their organization also reported downplaying their race and promoting shared interests with dominant-group members...Those who fell into this category perceived more career success than those who did not. Crucially, however, they also were more likely to burn out.
- **Vigilance.** High levels of vigilant behaviors — that is, always preparing for potential discrimination and mistreatment — were also positively associated with all three dimensions of code-switching at work.
- **Diversity Environment.** Racial composition of the workplace and people's perception of whether the organization promotes diversity impacted the extent to which folks code switched.

(McCluney, et al, 2019)

I mean, I'm not trying to be rude, but seriously...if code switching helps BIPOC folx get ahead...then what's the problem?



First of all...

- ❑ It's exhausting
- ❑ It's unfair
- ❑ It hurts people's self-esteem



**IF IT AINT
WHITE
IT
AIN'T
RIGHT**

Next....

IT REINFORCES
WHITE SUPREMACY
AND PUNISHES
THOSE WHO ARE
LESS ADEPT AT CODE
SWITCHING



Finding Jobs

- ❑ Impact of ethnic names
- ❑ Showing up to the interview
 - ❑ The first significant study of 'colorism' in the American workplace indicated that dark-skinned African Americans face a distinct disadvantage when applying for jobs, even if they have superior qualifications and experience to lighter-skinned black applicants.
- ❑ Biased hiring metrics (like finding a good cultural fit)

The Idea of “Professionalism”



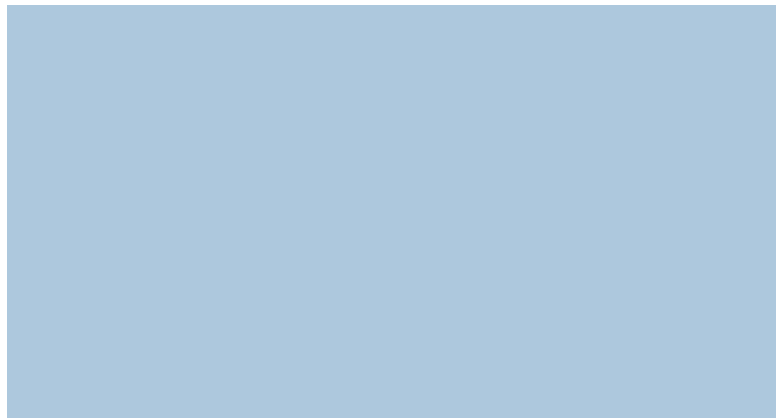
“On average, white participants evaluated code-switching behaviors positively and perceived those who engaged in these behaviors as *more* professional — particularly when black employees adjusted their hairstyle to better fit the norms of the dominant group” (McCluney, et al, 2019).

Professionalism, cont.

Dimensions of code switching related to “professionalism”

- ❑ in white and Western standards of dress and hairstyle (straightened hair, suits but not saris, and burqa and beard bans in some countries);
- ❑ in speech, accent, word choice, and communication (never show emotion, must sound “American,” and must speak white standard English);
- ❑ in attitudes toward timeliness and work style
- ❑ in scrutiny (black employees are monitored more closely and face more penalties as a result)





Discipline

Black Workers Really Do Need to Be Twice as Good. African American employees tend to receive more scrutiny from their bosses than their white colleagues, meaning that small mistakes are more likely to be caught, which over time leads to worse performance reviews and lower wages. GILLIAN B. WHITE, OCTOBER 7, 2015



Advancement

- ❑ Promotions | Biased professionalism often means those who deserve to rise to the top do not. Asian Americans, for example, are the least likely group to be promoted to management positions in the United States, despite being the most highly educated demographic. This disparity reflects racist stereotypes that paint Asian Americans as quiet, meek, and antisocial.
- ❑ Aside from driving unemployment, hiring discrimination also makes career growth more difficult for people of color. Biases in hiring decisions limit advancement into higher level or higher paying jobs. This, in turn, drives the racial wage gap.
- ❑ Whites are more likely to be employed than blacks or Hispanics, and whites are more likely to hold managerial or professional jobs. In the past decade, the percentage of workers who are managers or professionals increased from 29 percent to 33 percent for whites, from 16 percent to 22 percent for blacks, and from 13 percent to 14 percent for Hispanics.

Wage/Benefit discrimination



- ❑ Black households in the U.S. have, on average, considerably less wealth than white households. In 2016, the average wealth of households with a head identifying as black was \$140,000, while the corresponding level for white-headed households was \$901,000, nearly 6.5 times greater.
 - ❑ This is the consequence of many decades of racial inequality that imposed barriers to wealth accumulation either through explicit prohibition during slavery or unequal treatment after emancipation.
- ❑ In 2018, research on pay raises for folx in similar jobs and organizations found that men of color were 25 percent less likely than a white man to receive a raise when they ask.
- ❑ African Americans receive fewer employer-provided benefits than white workers. 55.4 percent of African Americans had private health insurance in 2018, compared with 74.8 percent of whites.

What does this have to do with
Trauma Informed Care?

Impact on client care



- It is now well established that BIPOC youth have better outcomes when they are paired with someone who looks like them, can effectively validate their traumatic lived experiences and properly label their emotional experiences without misdiagnosis.
- The shortfall in training, hiring, promoting, and supporting BIPOC staff leaves youth and families at a great disadvantage and leads to tremendous health disparities nationwide.
- Similarly, the significant barriers to advancement in the profession creates a lack of representation amongst policymakers in the field who can advocate for imperative system-wide changes for BIPOC.
- When current BIPOC mental health workers experience racism at work, their capacity to be fully effective with clients is diminished. The lack of a supportive and empowering work environment often leads to burnout and the inevitable loss the few BIPOC professionals in the industry.

Client Care, cont.



- Clients who struggle with the impacts of racial trauma consistently receive those same code-switching messages signaling a lack of safety in seeking the much-needed mental health support further disparity in treatment engagement.
- When BIPOC staff are unable to show up as their authentic selves at work, there is a signaling to clients that it is unsafe for them to show up as their authentic selves in treatment. BIPOC clients often code switch when they have white providers, diminishing any therapeutic gains.
- When the workplace maintains a culture of code-switching, white supremacy bias, and racism, those same biases will show up in the treatment provided by white staff in their work with BIPOC clients, leading to over diagnosis, a lack of engagement, criminalization and a host of other poor outcomes.



**DISMANTLING
RACISM AND
WHITE
SUPREMACY
CULTURE**

Organizations...



- Evaluate company culture. Organizations must examine how their workplace culture may create pressure for minorities to code-switch. Companies should consider if they are asking their black employees to do something that they will then be punished for. Specifically, are you asking black employees to bring their whole selves to work only if they also assimilate with dominant cultural norms?
- Tackle underrepresentation at all levels. Part of the reason black employees feel pressure to adjust their cultural-identity expression within the workplace is the chronic problem of minority underrepresentation in these environments. This makes even the slightest cultural “difference” more noticeable. Ensuring that people of color are represented at all levels of the organization will make their cultural identities — including hairstyles, interests, and speech patterns — normative and acceptable.

DIVERSITY INCLUSION BELONGING



Organizations, cont.

- Consider inclusion separately from diversity. Research shows that valuing diversity is not enough to reduce discrimination toward minorities. In addition to focusing on diversity, organizations need to create inclusive environments for employees to feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work.
- Practice inclusive behaviors. Leaders can be curious and learn about cultural differences and intentionally invite black employees into their networks and actively listen to their input.



BIPOC Folx...

- Assess your environment. During interviews, onboarding, or joining a new team, it is important to assess when and how others are expressing themselves, and whether they believe you will fit their environment.
- Assess your values. Because code-switching can be exhausting, it is important to evaluate your workplace goals and values.
 - Are you ambitious?
 - Do you seek advancement no matter the cost? Or is it more important for you to be your authentic self regardless of the work environment?
 - Are you more willing to code-switch for short-term gains but unwilling to sacrifice your authenticity for an extended time?

From: *The Costs of Code-Switching* by Courtney L. McCluney, Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee, 2019



If code switching is necessary in your professional setting...

Research suggests we try to do so in a way that:

- maximizes professional gains
- minimizes psychological and social distress.



For example:

- Previous research found that same-race mentoring provides more social and psychological support than cross-race mentoring. Black employees who strive to suppress their racial identity may miss out on these invaluable relationships.
- On the other hand, high-profile careers are typically obtained through networking with and being referred by powerful organizational members, who are typically white and male. In this case, code-switching may increase access to important career opportunities.

What are some other ways to do this?

Questions or
reflections?