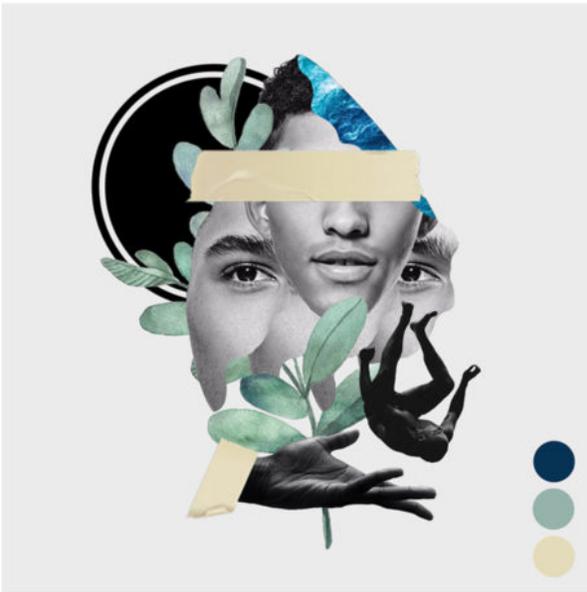


THE COSTS OF CODE-SWITCHING

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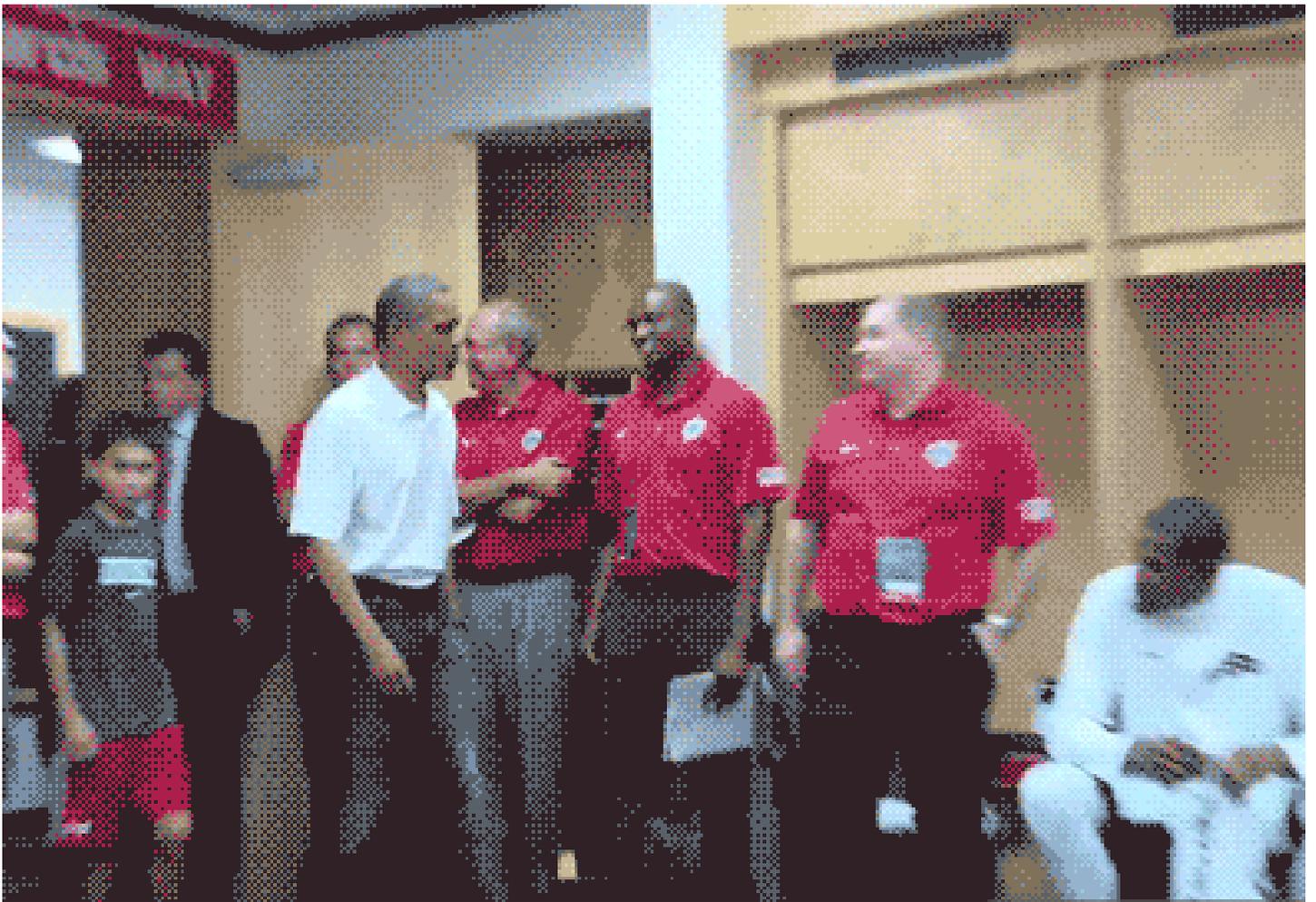
NOVEMBER 15, 2019



ARTWORK FROM LEFT: Oliv Barros, "Caido," 2018/2019; "Caindo 23," 2018/2019

At this point in my career, code-switching feels natural. I am not even cognizant that I do it anymore. —
30-year-old black male researcher

In 2012, a video of President Barack Obama entering the locker room of the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team went viral. In the clip, viewers can see that there's a clear difference between how Obama greets a white assistant coach and how he greets the black NBA player Kevin Durant. This moment inspired a sketch on Key & Peele in 2014 that played off the idea that Obama "switches" how he greets people, depending on whether they're white or black.



This kind of behavioral adjustment is casually referred to as “code-switching,” which has long been a strategy for black people to successfully navigate interracial interactions and has large implications for their well-being, economic advancement, and even physical survival.

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. Research suggests that code-switching often occurs in spaces where negative stereotypes of black people run counter to what are considered “appropriate” behaviors and norms for a specific environment. For example, research conducted in schools suggests that black students selectively code-switch between standard English in the classroom and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) with their peers, which elevates their social standing with each intended audience. We also see examples of guidelines encouraging black people to code-switch to survive police interactions, such as “acting polite and respectful when stopped” and “avoiding running even if you are afraid.”

Based on our research and the work of others, we argue that code-switching is one of the key dilemmas that black employees face around race at work. While it is frequently seen as crucial for professional advancement, code-switching often comes at a great psychological cost. If leaders are truly seeking to promote inclusion and address social inequality, they must begin by understanding why a segment of their workforce believes that they cannot truly be themselves in the office. Then they should address what everyone at the company needs to do to change this.

THE UPSIDES AND DOWNSIDES OF CODE-SWITCHING

Workplace research suggests that code-switching can generate both positive and negative outcomes for black employees. In our review of the existing literature, we identified three main reasons people code-switch in the workplace:

1. 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.
2. Avoiding negative stereotypes associated with black racial identity (e.g., incompetence, laziness) helps black employees be seen as leaders.
3. 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.

At the same time, we know that code-switching comes with social and psychological repercussions. Downplaying one's racial group can generate hostility from in-group members, increasing the likelihood that those who code-switch will be accused of "acting white." Seeking to avoid stereotypes is hard work, and can deplete cognitive resources and hinder performance. Feigning commonality with coworkers also reduces authentic self-expression and contributes to burnout.

For our latest working paper, we investigated how and when these positive and negative outcomes occurred in our sample, how those outcomes affected black employees, and how code-switching was evaluated by others. The goal of this research was to examine how code-switching as an impression-management strategy informs black people's work experiences. We also wanted to examine the pros and cons of this behavior for their professional and psychological well-being.

Our findings, while largely self-reported, add to the ongoing work of understanding how black professionals navigate mostly white American organizations. Creating workplaces that are inclusive of black people will enable companies to retain a diverse workforce and bolster innovation. However,

black employees who feel pressure to code-switch may perceive that they are being devalued, which in turn may reduce their commitment to the company and desire to contribute their unique insights. Our work provides an in-depth review of black employees' working lives that will allow companies to create better strategies for recruiting and retaining these workers.

THE COMPLEXITIES AND NUANCES OF CODE-SWITCHING

To begin our research, we developed a "code-switching at work" scale to assess the extent to which black people downplayed their race (e.g., "I try not to act like other members of my racial group"), avoided stereotypes (e.g., "I avoid behaviors that would make people at work think that I am lazy"), and promoted shared interests with majority-group members (e.g., "I try to talk about topics that other people would find interesting") through adjusting their behavior and appearance. We sent an online survey to black individuals from alumni pools of two large public universities in the U.S. and a Qualtrics survey panel to assess when and how they code-switched at work. Our sample, which consisted of approximately 300 black college-educated employees in the United States, indicated the extent to which they code-switch on a 7-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). On average, across all three dimensions, participants responded at a 4, which indicates that code-switching is neither overly present nor overly absent from these employees' work lives. Clearly, there is some complexity in when and how code-switching occurs.

Through our survey, participants largely acknowledged the benefits of engaging in the three kinds of code-switching listed above. They also articulated how they view and experience these benefits, and how different situations can influence the extent to which they code-switch. We list four of these situations below.

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. "I operate under the assumption that most people expect less of me because of my race," said a 31-year-old black male anesthesiologist. "Under that assumption, I find it easy to modify my behavior slightly to consistently outpace expectations of my abilities." Respondents also named specific stereotypical behaviors that they regularly avoid. "I go out of my way to make sure I don't appear lazy, because I know the stereotypes," said a 23-year-old black female program manager. "People talk, and if you look a certain way, you really have to work twice as hard." A woman in her 30s who works as a senior research program coordinator told us, "In my

actions and verbal communications, I try to avoid any opportunity for someone to label me as the 'angry black woman.' I also carry myself in a professional manner that may seem to be a step above the somewhat casual professional environment of the office."

"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. "I like to laugh, have fun, talk about sports, movies, and music," said a 53-year-old black female professor. "I do these things with anyone." 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. We suspect this is because the process of trying to fit in can be exhausting and dispiriting. "I rarely engage in social gatherings with coworkers because there are few things that we have in common, and I don't feel that they are interested in learning about things that interest me, because they are the majority. Thus, I keep limited relationships with coworkers," said a 29-year-old black female financial professional. "I also feel as though I am in a constant battle of censoring/watering down my views, thoughts, and personality for the possibility of being looked at differently than a non-black man or woman in the workplace if they exhibited the same behavior. It's exhausting navigating an all-white workplace."

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. One black man described his vigilance about race as "constantly being under a magnifying glass." "Due to the questions asked by coworkers, it is clear that they view my presence as a 'sneak peek' into black culture," he said. "I find myself constantly trying to be aware of my mannerisms, to ensure that I don't portray myself or the people I represent in a negative light." Another man, a 31-year-old financial analyst, noted that he's more vigilant at work because the stakes are so high. "If you're being judged by some random person, it is easier to dismiss it, because they probably had no effect in your life," he said. "But when you're being judged by coworkers in a place that you want to build a career in, it's not an easy dismissal. Those perspectives hold weight because it can make or break your career here in America." Finally, a 32-year-old black woman described vigilance as a day-to-day coping mechanism: "It has been my specific experience that it is simply easier to anticipate the complaints, jokes, and negative comments from white people and just adapt to their discomfort and ignorance in order to maintain workplace peace."

Diversity environment. We found that the racial composition of the workplace, as well as whether respondents perceived that their organization had an environment that promoted diversity, influenced the extent to which black employees code-switched.

While we know that black employees code-switch when they aren't well represented in companies, we also uncovered evidence that they downplay their racial identity and promote shared interests with others even when they are equally represented. Why and when is this the case? We have a few theories. It is possible that the stigma associated with black racial identity affects how larger groups are perceived, especially if they are seen as (or actually are) low performing. In these situations, black employees may downplay their race and try to reduce the stigma attached to it in the presence of others. Another theory is that non-black coworkers may be more likely to promote shared interests with others outside of their own racial group when black employees are equally represented. This may increase the likelihood of black employees code-switching in return.

We were also surprised to find that black employees avoided stereotypes about black racial identity when they perceived that their organization *either* did not embrace diversity (also known as a color-blind ideology) *or* strongly embraced differences (also known as a multicultural ideology). In other words, a failure to acknowledge differences reduces the ability to recognize discrimination. Black employees might therefore seek to avoid stereotypes in color-blind organizations to avoid differential treatment. In contrast, companies that actively promote a diversity-friendly work environment can make the differences between groups *more* visible. Conforming to stereotypes in these multicultural environments may encourage the belief that black people have innate and fixed behaviors. Thus, in order to be seen as an individual, a black employee may code-switch.

All of this is, of course, complex and nuanced; indeed, it seems that no diversity environment perfectly eliminates code-switching. But that may be the point. It can be challenging for a black employee to navigate *any* organization's racial composition and diversity climate, especially over the span of an entire career. One 32-year-old digital marketing assistant noted that the worst job he had had was at an organization where the culture was not diverse: "The strain I endured as a person of color just trying to fit in was so taxing," he said, "that it negatively affected every other part of my life." But even though he's at an organization now that's more focused on diversity, he still struggles to find coworkers to bond with because of his previous experience.



ARTWORK FROM LEFT: Oliv Barros, "Altar Particular," 2018/2019; "Amarelo e Rosa," 2018/2019

DO EFFORTS TO CODE-SWITCH REALLY PAY OFF?

Our survey revealed the various ways and reasons black employees code-switch, as well as some of the effects. But it was unclear whether code-switching enables black employees to be accepted as “professionals” in the workplace. To answer this question, we designed an online experimental study for almost 350 black and white participants recruited on CloudResearch and living in the U.S. to determine how they evaluated code-switching behaviors.

The participants were instructed to imagine themselves as recently hired employees at a law firm in a large city. They each read an email from a colleague named either Lamar Matthew Jackson or La’Keisha Renee Jackson, both third-year associates at the firm. In the email, Lamar or La’Keisha shared advice on the “unspoken” ways to succeed at the company: whether you should “be yourself” or try to fit in; use standard English or slang; or wear your hair “naturally” or conform to more traditionally “Eurocentric” hairstyles. Participants were randomly assigned into two conditions in which Lamar/La’Keisha code-switched by altering their preferred name (e.g., “My name is Lamar/La’Keisha, but you can call me Matt/Renee at work”), speech patterns, or preferred hairstyle depending on workplace expectations.

Participants then evaluated whether Lamar/La’Keisha’s behavior was appropriate for the workplace and level 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. “You should be allowed to keep your name, but slang and nappy hair are unprofessional for the workplace,” said one respondent. Another noted, “Looking and behaving professionally are necessary when working at a place like that. Appearances matter. Her name La’Keisha sounds obviously ‘black’ and some may even think ‘ghetto,’ but Renee is more conservative.”

In contrast, black participants disparaged the fictitious black lawyers who intentionally engaged in code-switching to fit in at work, and evaluated them as *less* professional. “Nothing is wrong with ‘ethnic’ names. That is a stereotype that I don’t agree with either,” said one respondent. “My name is my name. If they can pronounce every other name they can pronounce mine.... Use of the English language is understandable, especially in her profession. But to pretty much change her whole identity for a job isn’t right.” Another espoused the belief that “when a person is able to be themselves in a professional setting, they are more productive because they are able to focus on work instead of being distracted by keeping up a specific professional façade.”

Ultimately, our research clearly shows that minorities who code-switch are likely to face a professional dilemma: Should they suppress their cultural identity for the sake of career success? Or should they sacrifice potential career advancement for the sake of bringing their whole selves to work?

This dilemma not only poses career and psychological risks for individuals, it also damages organizations, which may miss out on the distinct perspectives and contributions from racial minorities who are uncomfortable being themselves in the workplace.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

In light of our research, we offer the following recommendations for companies and racial-minority professionals about the complexities of code-switching at work. The suggestions aren’t comprehensive, but will give everyone in your organization a way forward in beginning to tackle this behavior.

Organizations

Evaluate company culture. Organizations must examine how their workplace culture may create pressure for minorities to code-switch. For example, even when a company encourages employees to bring their authentic selves to work, racial-minority professionals may still perceive that doing so

risks appearing unprofessional. 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.

That said, we believe that company diversity efforts that solely seek to increase the number of black employees, without questioning the inclusivity of the environment, are bound to fail. As found in our data, code-switching also occurs when there are roughly equal numbers of black and non-black employees, which suggests that diversifying organizations is only part of the solution.

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. This includes collecting information on employees who are segmented by their social identities and collecting qualitative data for underrepresented group members whose experiences may not register in a quantitative survey.

Creating inclusive environments that work for everyone is challenging, however. Our research finds that black employees demonstrate less effort to code-switch when organizations deny *or* overemphasize cultural differences. One way to strike this balance is for company leaders to address issues outside of their companies that affect black employees’ work experiences. Inviting these conversations demonstrates that the company values black employees beyond their individual contributions to the bottom line.

Additionally, employers can ensure that all of their employees feel included by addressing the presence of differences and need for inclusion while simultaneously valuing fairness and meritocracy. Companies can explicitly state a desire to foster an inclusive workplace that both values

differences and also seeks the most qualified individuals to join the company. Taking it a step further, organizations can also create policies and rules that reflect these values, such as criteria for interviewing and hiring candidates that promote differences and meritocracy.

Leaders and coworkers

Practice inclusive behaviors. Inclusiveness is not just a broader organizational imperative; it's also a daily practice. Leaders can be curious and learn about cultural differences and intentionally invite black employees into their networks and actively listen to their input.

Start with yourself. Is there an identity that is important to you that you may be hiding or downplaying in the workplace? By bringing more of yourself to the table, you may encourage others to do the same. Recognizing your own differences can reveal which parts of you are not welcome at work, deepening your understanding of the professional dilemmas that black employees encounter when they bring their whole selves to the workplace.

Check your biases. It is important to both recognize difference at work and also be wary of pointing it out when it isn't warranted. If you catch yourself thinking that your black employee or coworker is not "like" other black people, engage in self-inquiry. Where do those thoughts come from? For example, you might like your black coworkers' hair when it is straightened compared to when it is in a natural style, but *why* do you feel that way? Engaging in this line of questioning promotes being curious about your biases rather than asking black people to explain their differences.

Black employees

Strategic code-switching. Given that black participants evaluated code-switching negatively compared to white participants in our research, it is important for black employees to strategically code-switch, if necessary, in a way that maximizes professional gains and 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. Several participants shared how they code-switch strategically at work. A 29-year-old assistant director positioning herself for advancement said, "I wear my hair naturally and also maintain my accent, but I do not use a lot of

slang or do things that are not professional, regardless of race. It has been a journey to find that balance in being my true self as a black woman in a predominately white, elite space.” Another woman, a 30-year-old research nurse, emphasized the specific way she thinks about and enacts professionalism. “At work my goal is to be professional — not to assimilate,” she said. “I dress, talk, and behave in a way that I feel instills confidence in my patients and coworkers. I don’t go out of my way to make my white coworkers [more] comfortable with my presence because it’s not my job to make them comfortable.”

Given the range of career experiences racial minorities have, we recommend that they consider the following when deciding whether or not to code-switch:

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. Are employees behaving differently when senior leaders are present compared to their normal behavior? Are you encouraged to adjust your behavior and appearance depending on the context? For example, are you being asked to meet with black clients but are less visible on projects that involve non-black clients? Use these environmental cues to make strategic code-switching decisions.

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? Knowing what you value for yourself and your career is imperative for deciding if and how to code-switch.

It is important to note that we are *not* suggesting that racial minorities should necessarily code-switch at work. We are highlighting the dilemmas that code-switching poses for their professional and personal lives — dilemmas that they shouldn’t have to solve on their own. Organizations can and should play a pivotal role in creating environments where code-switching is not necessary for success, particularly by cultivating spaces that value inclusion and differences. We believe that further research could capture evaluations of observable code-switching behaviors in realistic settings, which will continue this conversation. | **THE BIG IDEA**

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