

The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards

Stanford Social Innovation Review

June 2019

The standards of professionalism, according to American grassroots organizer-scholars Tema Okun and Keith Jones, are heavily defined by white supremacy culture—or the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness. In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness.

We are taught to identify white supremacy with violent segregationist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and their modern-day equivalents. Okun and Jones, however, introduce a different approach to thinking about white supremacy. In their definition, the term describes a series of characteristics that institutionalize whiteness and Westernness as both normal and superior to other ethnic, racial, and regional identities and customs. While people often don't view this theorization of white supremacy as violent, it can lead to systemic discrimination and physical violence.

According to Okun and Jones, white supremacy culture at an organizational level is apparent in: the belief that traditional standards and values are objective and unbiased; the emphasis on a sense of urgency and quantity over quality, which can be summarized by the phrase “the ends justify the means”; perfectionism that leaves little room for mistakes; and binary thinking.

These values, established over time as history and fact, have been used to create the narrative of white supremacy that underpins professionalism today, playing out in the hiring, firing, and day-to-day management of workplaces around the world. The story unfolds many ways: 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 scrutiny (black employees are monitored more closely and face more penalties as a result); and in attitudes toward timeliness and work style.

Author and grassroots activist adrienne maree brown says, “what we pay attention to grows.” We must broaden our perspective to include but also go beyond typical discussions of employment discrimination focused on obvious issues, such as workplace microaggressions and discriminatory hiring and firing practices. We need to expand our attention toward addressing more subtle barriers, from using biased hiring metrics to the acceptance of some work styles over others. Only then will we begin to address the damage done by the biased forms of professionalism that dominate workplaces in the United States and other white-majority countries.

In order to gain this clarity, we must be explicit about the ways we take in new information that are different from what we've been conditioned to believe. As a black American woman, the first time I was introduced to the idea of systemic racism, I was resistant. It was only after hearing about deep hurt experienced historically, institutionally, and interpersonally, and comparing it to my own life experiences, that my guard was lowered. As you read, note the following:

- Which part causes your own resistance to come up?
- What in the past has made you lower your guard around noticing racism, xenophobia, or other systemic inequity?
- How does the information presented in the article fit into your concept or understanding around racism and xenophobia?

If done honestly, this won't be comfortable, but it is necessary to gain awareness of the subtle and systemic discrimination that privileges white workers and impedes workers of color.

Mapping the Origins and Implementations of White 'Professionalism'

The implicit and at times explicit belief that white, Western, English speakers are more competent than everyone else is common in white-majority and Western countries. It affects everything from hiring and promoting to managing and firing. But where does it come from? How is it expressed? Here is an overview:

Psychology | Implicit bias, the automatic and unconscious associations people make based on discriminatory stereotypes, can help us understand some of the psychological processes underlying professionalism. Data from the Implicit Association Test (IAT) show that more people in the United States overwhelmingly have a pro-white preference. This connects with the professionalism tendency to privilege whiteness and white cultural norms.

From media to mind | Pro-white bias is shared through media—in television shows, films, and books—which overwhelmingly feature white Western men as competent leaders and the standard for normalcy. This media conditioning leads to a broad privileging of whiteness that in turn informs the biased workplace standards of professionalism. We see it demonstrated when not only white employers but also employers of color show a preference for white applicants and employees, as white people and people of color are all conditioned to center whiteness.

Is your name Western and white enough? | People with non-white sounding names find it more difficult to get responses to their job applications, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. Another study found that black men with no criminal record were more likely to receive fewer callbacks than white men with criminal records. In Canada, people with Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese names were 28 percent less likely to get called for an interview than their white counterparts. In the United Kingdom, a person named Adam was offered three times more interviews than someone named Mohammed. Also, in the United Kingdom, a study concluded that job applicants who had the same credentials but names that were changed to indicate non-white ethnicities received far less interest from employers.

Getting overt and covert | In Australia, a firm advertised having a preference for white job applicants. More covertly, employers sometimes change the goal posts when it comes to job requirements by demanding higher education credentials or years of experience. This discriminates against workers of color who face systemic barriers to obtaining such qualifications. And white privileging of this nature has contributed to increases in the unemployment rates of Muslim and other workers of color in white-majority countries like Australia.

Puzzle pieces | Biased professionalism can also be seen in what workplaces call “cultural fit,” a concept exemplified by people describing the ideal employee as someone they would “go to lunch with.” Cultural fit most often relates to an applicant’s values, behaviors, customs, interests, and even outward appearance. Perceived cultural fit is one of the leading ways professionalism privileges whiteness. A 2016 survey, for example, found that 84 percent of employers strongly focused on cultural fit.

Language | In the United States, the president of a human resources consulting firm felt [it](#) was hostile that an employee spoke a language other than English in the workplace. What’s often behind such descriptions is xenophobia, which creates a work environment biased toward white professionalism. Research finds that people with a non-native accent—one that does not sound white or American—face a glass ceiling, negatively impacting their promotion trajectory.

Vocabulary and grammar | Vocabulary and syntax can also be a means for employment discrimination. As people learn the terms of their trade, they desire to use them for the sake of efficient communication. But the push in academic and corporate spaces to use unnecessarily complex vocabulary, syntax, and jargon are accepted codes of biased professionalism. And the absence of academic or corporate vocabulary, syntax, and jargon in cover letters and resumes can lead to hiring discrimination.

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.

Hiring metrics | A less commonly discussed form of discrimination is hiring metric discrimination. While there has been no collected research relating to hiring metrics and race, research recently found employers read resumes with a gender bias, with those resumes perceived as “feminine” having fewer job prospects. Resume format is something that is often taught in homes—not in schools. If you are a first-generation white-collar worker, these are conversations that you didn’t have in your household. It’s important to ensure hiring processes don’t use resume incidentals, such as the use of bullet points, to unduly guide the determination of who is qualified or not.

Employment micromanagement and termination | Federal laws in many white-majority countries prohibit job discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, religion, age, disability, and medical history, in addition to prohibiting both disparate treatment (intentional discrimination) and disparate impact (unintentional discrimination). Still, evaluation standards based in the biased codes of professionalism continue to unfairly police and terminate minority employees. Even when workplaces adopt inclusive hiring practices, they can still enact racist managerial practices. For example, in the United States, black workers and other workers of color are monitored more than white workers, and there is a correlation between levels of monitoring with employment termination. While trying to appear inclusive, this style of management presumes that black and minority workers are less competent and cannot be trusted with completing tasks. Professionalism that presumes black and minority inferiority in relation to white superiority again indirectly privileges white workers.

Timeliness | How people manage their time in relationship to work plays a huge role in their success. Research from a 2017 Career Builder survey in the United States, for example, found that 41 percent of all employees are terminated due to continual lateness to work. A survey of 1,000 workers in the United Kingdom revealed that 23 percent of them reported being fired for things like doing personal tasks on lunch breaks, going to the bathroom too frequently, or being overly social. However, in a world driven by capitalism, professionalism is based on a monochronic relationship to timeliness and work style. It centers productivity over people, values time commitments, accomplishes tasks in a linear fashion, and often favors individuals who are white and Western. In contrast, polychronic cultures, while still able to get tasks completed, prioritize socialization and familial connections over economic labor. Within black and immigrant communities, there is often a deep ancestral connection to polychronic cultural orientation. Some people of color push against this by adopting a monochronic orientation, but many hold on to their polychronic work style. As a result, they may lose their jobs more often in a culture biased against their norms.

Changing Professionalism

Creating a fair and equitable workplace begins by accepting and appreciating the diversity of employees' cultures, experiences, and knowledge. This demands a self-critical interrogations in the style of those practiced by groups such as the Young Lords. Four questions can help decenter whiteness in your workplace's standard of professionalism:

- What is your personal relationship with the standards of professionalism discussed in this article?
- How have you seen these standards of professionalism play out in your workplace? How have you contributed?
- What are some ways you have seen others challenge professionalism standards at an organizational or individual level?
- Who might be an ally in changing your workplace culture? Is there additional funding that can support creating a committee in your organization to undertake this emotional and difficult work?

With answers those questions, you can begin to try to transform the standards of professionalism. Inspiration can be found from cooperatives and nonprofits such as Anti Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA), Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive (CoFED), Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC), and Mondragon. All of them are exploring ways to create a more inclusive workplace environments in relation to putting people before profit.

At the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding at Queens College (CERRU), I've come up with an initial framework for equitable workplace standards. It allows workers from ethnic and racial backgrounds to co-create shared work environments based on the following tenets that elevate historically marginalized people:

1. Do seek out renowned process facilitators to foster awareness of implicit bias and white supremacy culture in professional, managerial, and workplace cultures.
2. Don't expect a one-time implicit bias workshop or panel to undo years of inequity. Do ongoing work with consultants who specialize in white supremacy culture to create human resources

policies and procedures that at a minimum: embrace cultural differences in dress, speech, and work style; evaluate traditionally accepted professional tenets of workplace success, such as timeliness, schedules, leadership style, and work style; center traditionally marginalized voices in assessments; and examine hiring, firing, promotion practices, and work culture in real time. Don't expect this work to be cheap or quick.

As Audre Lorde writes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." We can push organizations to change their policies, but it's unlikely that efforts arising within white supremacist culture will be enough to overhaul professionalism in white-majority countries. However, it's important that workers of color and their allies have the tools, flawed or not, to make incremental changes and achieve the work lives that they have fought for and deserve.

Employers' Replies to Racial Names

National Bureau of Economics Research

September 2003

A job applicant with a name that sounds like it might belong to an African-American - say, Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones - can find it harder to get a job. Despite laws against discrimination, affirmative action, a degree of employer enlightenment, and the desire by some businesses to enhance profits by hiring those most qualified regardless of race, African-Americans are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed and they earn nearly 25 percent less when they are employed.

Now a "field experiment" by NBER Faculty Research Fellows **Marianne Bertrand** and **Sendhil Mullainathan** measures this discrimination in a novel way. In response to help-wanted ads in Chicago and Boston newspapers, they sent resumes with either African-American- or white-sounding names and then measured the number of callbacks each resume received for interviews. Thus, they experimentally manipulated perception of race via the name on the resume. Half of the applicants were assigned African-American names that are "remarkably common" in the black population, the other half white sounding names, such as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker.

To see how the credentials of job applicants affect discrimination, the authors varied the quality of the resumes they used in response to a given ad. Higher quality applicants were given a little more labor market experience on average and fewer holes in their employment history. They were also portrayed as more likely to have an email address, to have completed some certification degree, to possess foreign language skills, or to have been awarded some honors.

In total, the authors responded to more than 1,300 employment ads in the sales, administrative support, clerical, and customer services job categories, sending out nearly 5,000 resumes. The ads covered a large spectrum of job quality, from cashier work at retail establishments and clerical work in a mailroom to office and sales management positions.

The results indicate large racial differences in callback rates to a phone line with a voice mailbox attached and a message recorded by someone of the appropriate race and gender. Job applicants with white names needed to send about 10 resumes to get one callback; those with African-American names needed to send around 15 resumes to get one callback. This would suggest either employer prejudice or employer perception that race signals lower productivity.

The 50 percent gap in callback rates is statistically very significant, Bertrand and Mullainathan note in **Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination** (NBER Working Paper No. [9873](#)). It indicates that a white name yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience. Race, the authors add, also affects the reward to having a better resume. Whites with higher quality resumes received 30 percent more callbacks than whites with lower quality resumes. But the positive impact of a better resume for those with African-American names was much smaller.

"While one may have expected that improved credentials may alleviate employers' fear that African-American applicants are deficient in some unobservable skills, this is not the case in our data," the authors write. "Discrimination therefore appears to bite twice, making it harder not only for African-Americans to find a job but also to improve their employability."

From a policy standpoint, this aspect of the findings suggests that training programs alone may not be enough to alleviate the barriers raised by discrimination, the authors write. "If African-Americans recognize how employers reward their skills, they may be rationally more reluctant than whites to even participate in these programs."

The experiment, conducted between July 2001 and January 2002, reveals several other aspects of discrimination. If the fictitious resume indicates that the applicant lives in a wealthier, or more educated, or more-white neighborhood, the callback rate rises. Interestingly, this effect does not differ by race. Indeed, if ghettos and bad neighborhoods are particularly stigmatizing for African-Americans, one might have expected them to be helped more than whites by having a "good" address.

Further, discrimination levels are statistically uniform across all the occupation and industry categories covered in the experiment. Federal contractors, sometimes regarded as more severely constrained by affirmative action laws, do not discriminate less. Neither do larger employers, or employers who explicitly state that they are "Equal Opportunity Employer" in their ads.

Another finding is that employers located in more African-American neighborhoods in Chicago are slightly less likely to discriminate. There is also little evidence that social background of applicants - suggested by the names used on resumes - drives the extent of discrimination.

The advantage of their study, the authors note, is that it relies on resumes, not actual people applying for jobs, to test discrimination. A race is randomly assigned to each resume. Any differences in response are due solely to the race manipulation and not to other characteristics of a real person. Also, the study has a large sample size, compared to tests of discrimination with real applicants.

One weakness of the study is that it simply measures callbacks for interviews, not whether an applicant gets the job and what the wage for a successful applicant would be. So the results cannot be translated into hiring rates or earnings. Another problem of the study is that newspaper ads represent only one channel for job search.

Black Workers Really Do Need to Be Twice as Good

The Atlantic

October 2015

For decades, black parents have told their children that in order to succeed despite racial discrimination, they need to be “twice as good”: twice as smart, twice as dependable, twice as talented. This advice can be found in everything from literature to television shows, to day-to-day conversation. Now, a new paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research shows that when it comes to getting and keeping jobs, that notion might be more than just a platitude.

There’s data that demonstrates the unfortunate reality: Black workers receive extra scrutiny from bosses, which can lead to worse performance reviews, lower wages, and even job loss. The NBER paper, authored by Costas Cavounidis and Kevin Lang, of Boston University, attempts to demonstrate how discrimination factors into company decisions, and creates a feedback loop, resulting in racial gaps in the labor force.

The researchers constructed an economic model based on labor market outcomes for unemployed workers. They build on existing data about job duration, unemployment duration, and lifetime earnings, and then simulate how companies determine whether or not new hires are a good fit. They observe that the pool of unemployed black workers is likely to be seen as less skilled because of more consistent or prolonged unemployment. That can make companies less likely to hire them, and more skeptical once they do. This leads employers to invest more heavily in monitoring black employees. That could be everything from instructing supervisors to closely watch a new hire, or more directly monitoring job performance—for instance how many boxes a worker correctly packs at a shipping center. Because black workers are more closely scrutinized, it increases the chances that errors—large or small—will be caught. According to the researchers it’s more likely that a black employee would be let go for these errors than a white one. Thus another way of looking at the findings, Lang says, is that blacks simply don’t get a second chance.

Once fired, black workers return to the pool of unemployed—where they will once again have a difficult time finding work, prompting their next employer to be wary as well. In the meantime, white workers are less scrutinized, and as a result, they enjoy a longer tenure on the job, which leads to a stronger work history, more skills, and higher wages.

In order to keep a job, black workers also must meet a higher bar. Only in instances where black workers are monitored and displayed a significantly higher skill level than their white counterparts would they stand a significant chance of keeping their jobs for a while, the researchers found. But even in instances where the productivity of black workers far exceeded their white counterparts, there was still evidence that discrimination persisted, which could lead to lower wages or slower promotions.

This all may help explain the continuing gaps in labor market outcomes between black and white Americans. Historically, the unemployment rate of black Americans hovers about 2 percentage points higher than their white counterparts. Right now, the gap is much wider. At the close of the third quarter the unemployment rate for white Americans was 4.5 percent, below the national average of just

over 5 percent. For blacks, however, unemployment was 9.4 percent. And that's an improvement. Unemployment among black Americans only dipped below 10 percent at the start of 2015—more than five years into the economic recovery. The unemployment rate for whites never even topped 10 percent.

Unsurprisingly, all of these job switches mean that black workers can expect to make less over a lifetime than their white counterparts, which can exacerbate the income and wealth gaps between the races. “With a monitoring regime to look forward to at any future job, a black worker revealed to be in a good match could receive less than an unrevealed white worker,” the economists write.

The current system, in which black workers are disproportionately monitored and let go, while white workers are allowed longer stints, isn't just bad for black people—it's bad for the labor market overall. Such an arrangement is inefficient since a large pool of the unemployed drags on overall productivity and labor health, and since such bias doesn't guarantee that the most productive person gets, and keeps, a job.