OVERCOMING WOMEN'S WORKPLACE CONFLICTS
BECAUSE OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Andrea S. Kramer & Alton B. Harris

Women often complain about their relationships with female colleagues.

They frequently say to us such things as, "I get along fine with the men I work with, it's the women I have trouble with;" "My boss behaves like a Queen Bee, she cares only about herself and protecting her position;" and "I'm sick and tired of women's gossiping and backbiting." The popular media and many advice books commonly attribute such complaints to the "fact" that women are fundamentally predisposed—whether because of nature, nurture, or both—to be hostile to and competitive with other women. This is reflected in the titles of some books in this genre: *Mean Girls*, *Meaner Women*, *Mean Girls Grow Up*, *The Stiletto In Your Back*, *Tripping the Prom Queen*, *Working with Bitches*, and *Women's Inhumanity to Women*.

Contrary to the ugly picture these titles paint, the reality is that women's often-troubled, same-gender workplace relationships are not due to some unique, internally motivated female tendency, desire, or disposition to be antagonistic to other women. Rather, women's often unsatisfactory same-gender relationships are the result of two distinctive characteristics of our modern workplaces: their highly gendered nature and the differing social identities of the women in them.

Gendered workplaces are controlled and dominated by men and steeped in masculine norms, values, and expectations. In such workplaces, women's advancement opportunities are far more limited than men's. As a result, women are forced to compete with one another for access to the limited resources, networks, and visibility needed for career

success. This structurally-forced same-gender competition creates a toxic environment for women seeking harmonious, mutually supportive same-gender relationships.

But gender is not the whole story. In today's workplaces, women work with other women with very different social identities from their own—whether because of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, maternal status, or some other distinguishing characteristic. These differing social identities intersect with women's common gender and are called *intersectionalities*.[1] Women with different intersectionalities are likely to have significantly different workplace experiences and encounter significantly different career obstacles. These differing experiences and obstacles are, in large part, due to the different stereo-type-driven biases directed against them because of their social identities. As a result, women with different intersectionalities frequently view their opportunities, acceptance, and status in such fundamentally different ways that close, supportive, and satisfying same-gender relationships become difficult.

In this Manifesto we will focus only on the second cause of women's often fraught, same-gender workplace relationships—differing intersectionalities. While intersectionalities of all sorts can cause tensions among women—for example, workplace relationships are often problematic for older and younger women, women with different sexual orientations, and women with small children and those without—perhaps no intersectional difference is more pernicious for women's close same-gender relationships than that of race. Therefore, as a way of exploring how and why women's intersectional differences often make their same-gender workplace relationships difficult, we will focus on black women's and white women's workplace relationships. We will first discuss why these relationships are so often problematic and then offer specific suggestions for what women can do to improve their relationships.

BACKGROUND

No group of women is more disadvantaged in their pursuit of career success than black women. As of 2016, Black women constituted 13.4 percent of the women in the United States,[2] but only 1.3 percent of executives and senior-level managers in S&P 500 companies, compared with nearly 22 percent being white women.[3] Black women account for only 4 percent of women lawyers, 2 percent of women doctors, and 5.9 percent of tenured or tenure-track female professors at U.S. four-year colleges and universities.[4] Black women have lower promotion rates than comparably qualified white women; experience more job segregation, more pressure to modify their appearance, behavior, and attitudes; and have lower career expectations overall.[5]

As a result of the wide career achievement gap between black women and white women, such women's perspectives on and attitudes toward careers, the opportunities available to them, and the bias present in their workplaces are often very different.

These differing experiences and obstacles are, in large part, due to the different stereotype-driven biases directed against them because of their social identities.

While the work experiences of black women are not all the same, any more than are the experiences of all white women, most black women are likely to share some key career experiences that contrast sharply with the experiences of the white women with which they work. These different experiences contribute significantly to the difficulties black and white women can have in forming close, comfortable, and mutually supportive relationships.

STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are one reason black women's and white women's workplace experiences are so often significantly different. While "women" as a general category are typically stereotyped as being, and expected to be, communal—that is, pleasant, caring, modest, and deferential—that stereotype is really applied only to white women. Rather than being viewed as, and thought that they should be, communal, black women are commonly stereotyped as either angry—the "angry black woman"—or dutifully helpful to their white employers—a "mammy"—but in either case as lacking intelligence and competence.[6] Based on interviews with nearly 5,500 Americans, the 2012 American National Election Study found that 44 percent of whites believe whites are more intelligent than blacks.[7] And a 1995 study found that one of the three characteristics most commonly attributed to black people is low intelligence (the other two being athletic and rhythmic ability).[8]

Because of the way white women are stereotyped, they face what we call the Goldilocks Dilemma. One horn of this dilemma is that although white women are expected to be communal, when they are, they are seen as "too soft" for challenging leadership roles. The other horn of the dilemma is that when white women act agentically, that is with the decisiveness and independence expected of men, they are seen as "too hard" to be

likable. Hence, white women's common career challenge is to appear "just right": to project confidence and competence without appearing too soft or too hard. Because black women are stereotyped differently from white women, they face a variant of the Goldilocks Dilemma. Their challenge is to be perceived as competent and confident without being viewed as either a mammy, on the one hand, or as an angry black woman, on the other. Thus, while black and white women share a common gender, such women often must adopt different strategies and tactics to achieve career success, which may bring them into tense if not conflicting relationships.

AUTHENTICITY

Gendered workplaces put pressure on all women to conform to the prevailing masculine norms, values, and expectations. Black women, however, face an additional pressure not part of white women's working lives: the pressure to conform to *white* norms, values, and expectations.

Black women who are in corporate management, hold professional positions, serve in political office, are entrepreneurs, or are otherwise pursuing a career typically inhabit two distinct cultures. In their work lives, black women are immersed in the white, hierarchical, heterosexual, conservative, and middle-class culture that dominates our business, professional, political, and academic institutions. In their personal lives, black women often live in a very different culture with distinctive interpersonal communication styles, means of self-expression, attitudes toward relaxation, and forms of entertainment. As a consequence, many black women must "code-switch" to comfortably function in these different cultures. Such code-switching often requires black women to modify

their behavior, appearance, language, interests, and other aspects of how they present themselves in order to be accepted into both white organizational culture and black social culture.

Former President Barack Obama was a master at code-switching. While capable of giving soaring, formal addresses, he was also able to make other blacks entirely comfortable with him. For example, a 2009 video of him in a restaurant in a black neighborhood in Chicago shows him, when asked by the cashier if he needs change, replying, "Naw, we straight!"[9]

Michelle Obama found it much more difficult than her husband to code switch. As First Lady, she encountered enormous pressure to adopt a style and project a persona that would make white voters more comfortable with her. She was criticized for being too aggressive, pushy, and angry.[10] Her appearance, conduct, and communication style were all under constant scrutiny. In response, she quite obviously sought to modify the way she came across to whites by behaving less forcefully, presenting a more feminine look, and adopting a softer conversational style. She writes in her autobiography, "I've been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an 'angry black woman.' I've wanted to ask my detractors which part of that phrase matters to them the most—is it 'angry' or 'black' or 'woman'?"[11] She adds, "I was exhausted by the meanness, thrown off by how personal it had become, and feeling, too, as if there was no way I could quit."[12]

Michele Obama's sense of exhaustion is felt by many black women as they are continually forced to code switch in an effort to fit into a dominant masculine white culture. But, of course, there are limits to just how far any woman can go and still maintain a sense

of her authenticity. Without a sense of such authenticity—a conviction that her true self (to a large degree) is aligned with the outward expression of that self—a woman's emotional well-being suffers, her productivity declines, and her personal satisfaction plunges.[13] Maintaining a sense of authenticity can be particularly difficult for black women if they are continuously experiencing pressure as to how to dress, wear their hair, relate, and be less "ethnic."[14] Author Ijeoma Oluo writes movingly of this tension between authenticity and fitting in:

I dressed like every day was a job interview. I was overpolite to white people I encountered in public. I bent over backwards to prove that I was not angry, that I was not a threat. I laughed off racist jokes as if I didn't feel the sting. I told myself that it would all be worth it one day, that being a successful black woman was revolution enough. But as I got older, as the successes I had reached for slowly became a reality, something inside me began to shift. I would try to make my voice quieter in meetings and I couldn't. I would try to laugh off the racist jokes and I couldn't. I would try to accept my boss's reasons for why I could have my promotion but not my raise, and I couldn't.[15]

Without a sense of such authenticity… a woman's emotional well-being suffers, her productivity declines, and her personal satisfaction plunges.

Because black women's conduct and appearance are often vigilantly policed by their white coworkers, even highly successful black women, such as graduates of the Harvard Business School, report they cannot "be themselves" at work.[16] Instead, they must continually attempt to meet other people's expectations, adeptly navigate workplace politics, and keep their emotional intelligence on high alert.

We frequently hear about white women who apparently feel free to counsel their black female colleagues about their appearance, style, and speech. White women may believe they are only helping black women avoid violating dominant (white) cultural norms, nevertheless such advice can lead to an uncomfortable tension between black women and white women. Friendships, easy social relations, and mutual support can be difficult, with sisterhood a distant prospect.

RACISM

Black women's need to code switch to fit into gendered workplaces is, in most cases, due less to outright racism—the view that blacks are inherently inferior to whites—and more to the expectation that everyone engaged in workplace managerial processes must conform to the dominant white, masculine, and heterosexual norms, values, and customs. But beyond such universal pressure, black women are also subject to particularly hurtful slights and microaggressions. This is well illustrated by the experiences of Edith Cooper, head of Human Capital Management at Goldman Sachs:

I am frequently asked, "what country are you from" (I grew up in Brooklyn). I've been questioned about whether I really went to Harvard (I did) or how I got in

(I applied). I've been asked to serve the coffee at the client meeting (despite being there to "run" the meeting) and have been mistaken as the coat check receptionist at my son's school event.[17]

Undoubtedly, every black professional woman could provide her own list of slights and indignities she has suffered because of her race. But again, such insensitive white behavior is probably due more to ignorance and implicit stereotypes than to outright racism.

But racism most surely affects black women's career advancement. A 2002 study by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development found that in comparison to white women, black women are more likely to be treated unfairly in promotions and training, to be discriminated against in advancement opportunities, and to experience the greatest sense of frustration and disengagement.[18] Studies show that in all types of businesses, black women experience significantly less acceptance into informal social networks than white women.[19] And 40 percent of black professional women believe that this lack of access to their organization's informal networks and social systems inhibits their career advancement.[20] Moreover, black women's exclusion from such networks further exacerbates their separation from their white female colleagues.

Racism is frequently on full display when black women supervise white women because white women often "are not predisposed to relinquish stereotypes and feelings of racial superiority."[21] Studies show that because of a (conscious or unconscious) sense of racial superiority, many white women view reporting to black women managers as contrary to the "natural order" and, therefore, they react by disparaging their managers' competence and entitlement to leadership.[22] Many white women find it extremely difficult to acknowledge that black female managers hold their management positions because of

talent, hard work, and solid accomplishments.[23] Not surprisingly, therefore, black women managers often describe their workplace interactions with white women as "demeaning" and "disrespectful."[24]

SISTERHOOD

Black women's workplace relationships with white women are frequently marked by wariness, distance, distrust, and little prospect for sisterhood. It is not hard to under-stand why, when we recognize the extent of the "advice" black women receive, the social exclusion they experience, the slights and microaggressions they endure, and the discrimination they suffer. Because of their different workplace experiences, concerns, and objectives, establishing a sisterhood between black women and white women — even when the women have the best of intentions — can be difficult.

Before a first step toward sisterhood can be taken, both differences *and* similarities must be acknowledged and embraced. An interracial sisterhood is certainly possible, but it requires a good deal of communication and understanding from both sides of the racial divide.

Black women's and white women's views of and attitudes about each other reflect multi-layered feelings, thoughts, and beliefs resulting from the internalization of cultural, family, and workplace stereotype-driven biases. Such biases are ubiquitous and difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate entirely.

Based on our years of coaching and counseling, however, we believe most black and white women would prefer to build interracial sisterhoods rather than to separate into

uncivil racial standoffs. The creation of a sisterhood and the avoidance of incivility is possible, but only after open, candid, and respectful conversations about attitudes towards, experiences with, and expectations of members of the other race. These conversations can implicate individuals' biases or prejudices, causing such persons to become defensive if not openly hostile. The trick, therefore, is to find ways to talk about differences without defensiveness, ways that increase understanding, appreciation, and respect, and that move women toward sisterhood.

GOING FORWARD

Both black and white women need to be prepared for some rough sailing, at least at first, when they attempt to engage in candid conversations with someone of a different race. In her book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Oluo writes that when you attempt to have such conversations, "You're going to screw this up royally. More than once. But you should have these conversations anyway."[25] To maximize the chances that black and white women's conversations with each other are productive and move them toward and not away from sisterhood, we offer the following suggestions as to how women should approach such conversations.

Before a first step toward sisterhood can be taken, both differences and similarities must be acknowledged and embraced.

1. **Be Clear (At Least To Yourself) About Why You Are Having The Conversation.** Once you are clear about your objective in entering into a conversation about relational difficulties with a woman of a different race, you need to be on guard that she does not have an incompatible objective. Conversations about racial attitudes, feelings, and beliefs can very easily result in resentment and hostility if the participants have a misunderstanding about why they are having the conversation in the first place.

2. **Don't Become Defensive And Don't Provoke Defensiveness.** If you are talking about sensitive racial issues and become tempted to defend yourself—"I am not a racist," "Some of my best friends are black people"—stop and ask yourself why you feel threatened. Has your objective shifted from building an interracial relationship to protecting your own ego?

   By the same token, avoid saying anything that is likely to cause the other person to become defensive. For example, saying "I'm sorry you feel that way" devalues the other person's feelings by suggesting their feelings may not be justified.

3. **The Problem Is Bigger Than Your Feelings.** Conflicts between black and white women are the result of biases that are systemic in our society and workplaces. While your personal feelings are certainly involved, keep in mind that the biases you find in yourself are likely to be experienced by your conversational partner on a daily basis, and she is likely to be subjected to slights and incivilities from many people in many situations. So don't make the conversation about the way you feel.

4. **Your Aim Should Be To Understand, Not To Demonstrate You're A Good Person.** Whatever your objective in entering into the conversation in the first place, you should consistently work to understand where the other woman is coming from, what vulnerabilities she may be reluctant to reveal, and how you can make clear that it is safe for her to proceed with this conversation.

   It is precisely because black and white women have had such different experiences and hold such different perspectives that sisterhood can be so difficult. You should strive to understand and to be seen as seeking to understand, not to demonstrate that you are not biased or hostile or disapproving. Forget about establishing the validity of your own point of view. Your aim should be to do better, not to prove you are a good person.

5. **Color-blind Is Difference Blind.** Thinking, or worse saying, "the world would be a better place if all of us were color-blind" is not only dumb—the world is never going to be color-blind—but also highly insensitive to the fact that the woman with whom you are talking probably takes great pride in her racial identity and does not want it ignored but acknowledged and valued. Suggesting we should be color-blind is a prescription for increased conflict, not a way to build a sisterhood.

6. **Show Interest.** When a woman is trying to talk with you about her difficulties relating because one of you is black and one is white, both of you need to have and to show genuine interest in the other woman's feelings, experiences, perspectives, and expectations. If you both have such an interest—and are prepared to listen to the criticism and hostility that may well come out—a lasting resolution of your conflicts is possible. If you are not, there is no possibility of such a resolution.

7. **Be Prepared To Express Your Desire For Sisterhood.** Key to constructive conversations between black and white women is aligning yourself with the woman with whom you are speaking, not increasing the distance between you. If you want to have solid, positive, supportive relationships with women of a different race than your own, don't be afraid to acknowledge that you want to provide and find safe spaces within which she can speak about herself, express her frustration, and anger, and drop her "we are all alike" mask.

8. **Some Sure-Fire Conversation Killers.** There are several things that should never be said in conversations with a woman of a different race. Among them are, "No offense, but …," "Don't be so sensitive," "Can't you take a joke?", "I am not a racist," and "You are different." Such statements shut down conversations, rather than open them up. You may not want to say, "I want to be your sister," but you can say, "I want you to help me do a better job of managing our relationship."

9. **Take Responsibility For What You Have Said and Done.** If you are ready to talk with a woman of a different race, you should also be ready to learn how you have, in some way, offended, hurt, or humiliated her. When you do learn, don't say something like, "I certainly didn't mean to do that," but rather something like, "I am truly sorry. That was unkind of me, and I will try not to do that again." Acknowledge your own lack of sensitivity and admit your implicit bias. Conversations between black and white women should force both women out of their comfort zones and into a place where they are ready to acknowledge and own their own attitudes, conduct, and insensitivities.
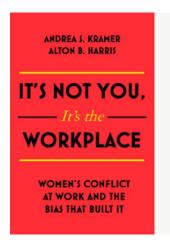
CONCLUSION

Sisterhood among women with different social identities can be difficult but it is not impossible. For it to happen, women with different social identities need to reach out to each other. They cannot wait for another woman to reach out. One particularly effective way to do this is to mentor and support a woman with different social identities from your own. Find ways to include her in work-related and professional development opportunities. But before you offer her advice, do a good deal of listening to identify the kind of help she really wants and needs. Find ways to demonstrate that those women you work with who have different social identities are valued members of your team. **This can start a sea change in same-gender workplace relationships.** ▮

Info

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrea S. Kramer (Andie) and Alton B. Harris (Al) are distinguished attorneys, married to each other, and co-authors of *Breaking Through Bias: Communication Techniques for Women to Succeed at Work* (Bibliomotion, May 2016). For decades, Andie and Al have tackled gender bias in the workplace through speaking, workshops, articles, blog posts, podcasts, one-on-one counselling, and engagements with national and international business and professional organizations. They have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *The Huffington Post, The Chicago Tribune*, *Fast Company*, *Crain's*, and many other publications. They provide practical techniques that women, men, and organizations can use to prevent the gender stereotypes and the biases that flow from them from slowing down or derailing women's careers.

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