



# THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

## LESSONS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

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**HAIR:** *To straighten my hair, or to not straighten my hair... THAT is the question.* Recently, a Black woman (Baby Boomer) told me how bold I was to wear my hair naturally, especially in the workplace. I have worked in semi-conservative settings wearing a myriad of natural hairstyles, including locs and an Afro. I often reflect on the experiences of my mentors and consider myself lucky, because many of them did not have the fortune of choice.

*Know that the reception to “natural” or “ethnic” hair styles (as you will hear them described) varies from workplace to workplace. You should consider a number of things:*

- 1. Your personal style—how do YOU like to wear your hair?*
- 2. The opportunities you intend to pursue. Do they reside in sectors/ industries that call for a more conservative appearance (e.g. civil service), or is there some flexibility (e.g. technology)?*
- 3. Does your personal style align with the presentation norms of your career goal(s)? I enjoy wearing my hair in its most natural state, and I must work in an environment that gives me the freedom to do just that.*

At a conference, sitting and

casually conversing with a group of Black colleagues: One colleague—a 20-something woman—says, “Hey guys, let’s split up for the next session. You know people feel some type of way when all of the Black folks sit together.”

I’ve heard other Black people make variations of this statement for the greater part of my life (both in academic and professional settings).

**“THE BLACK EXPERIENCE’ IS A COMPLEX COLLECTION OF STORIES, TRIALS, TRIUMPHS, ACHIEVEMENTS, STRUGGLES, ETC. BECAUSE THE BLACK COMMUNITY IS DIVERSE.”**

*I socialize with whomever I wish, regardless of race/ethnicity. Period. I understand that to some people, it may appear to be exclusionary (and sometimes intimidating) to see a group of Black individuals conversing. (I even feel silly typing this, because no one would bat an eye at a group of white people sitting together, conversing.) Part of this has to do with sheer numbers; there’s more white people than Black people in the U.S. I think that it is important to make an effort*

*non-Black folks on issues pertaining to Black folks, keep in mind that NONE of them can truly tell YOU what YOUR experience is or can/should be as a Black person. I would also use great caution with having discussions about complex issues of race and identity in the workplace, as they may not be work-appropriate. (Refer to your employer's handbook/code of conduct).*

## **STAY STRONG, STAY AUTHENTIC, AND KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

What's in a Name? On a few occasions, I have had colleagues (both Black and non-Black) delve into the politics of "Black names." In some instances I have spoken up to offer a different perspective, and correct colleagues. In other instances, I said nothing. I regret the times that I said nothing.

Among some of the commentary I have heard:

- "Why do people name their children that?"
- "That poor kid will never get a job with a name like that."
- "I would legally change my name if my mom named me \_\_\_\_."
- "Wow, that name is so ghetto."

*If you ever have the opportunity to speak up and call out a colleague who makes disparaging comments about someone's name—do it! Yes, that means you may be labeled as a "fun snatcher" or the "P.C. police." Yes, that means sometimes you will call out a colleague that looks like you. No extensive explanation is required. Simply let folks know that it is wrong to make derogatory remarks about someone's name, and leave it at that. Remember, this is all part of dismantling a system in which resumes with "Black names" are 50% less likely to result in a call back than resumes with "White names."*

*Also, make sure to teach people how to pronounce your name correctly if it is difficult for them to pronounce. (This is truly the*

*to network and connect with colleagues of all backgrounds; I have established a number of valued professional and personal relationships by doing this. However, I will never (ever) feel bad about socializing with a group of peers that look like me.*

Qualifying statements made by non-Black colleagues before expressing their knowledge/expertise of "the Black experience":

They include:

- "My buddy from law school is African American, so I know..."
- "I voted for Obama, so I know..."
- "I am married to a Black woman/man, so I know..."
- "I've worked in the inner-city before, so I know..."
- "I'm a minority too, so I know..."

*In my honest (and humble) opinion, no one can truly understand "the Black experience" except for Black people. Furthermore, "the Black experience" is a complex collection of stories, trials, triumphs, achievements, struggles, etc. because the Black community is diverse. Consider the range in terminology we use to identify ourselves: Black, African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, Nubian, etc.—diversity! The point is, while it is okay to have healthy discourse with*

*story of my life.) I love the following quote by actress Uzo Aduba:*

"I went home and asked my mother if I could be called Zoe. I remember she was cooking, and in her Nigerian accent she said, 'Why?' I said, 'Nobody can pronounce it.' Without missing a beat, she said, 'If they can learn to say Tchaikovsky and Michelangelo and Dostoyevsky, they can learn to say Uzoamaka.'" *Yaaaaas Mama, yaaaaaas!*

Best Practices I've Developed: I have learned many lessons throughout my professional journey; here are some (in the context of race and gender) that have served me particularly well:

- Good discernment is powerful. Know when to speak up, and when something is not meant to be taken personally. A colleague shared something with me called the "48 Hour Rule." When something happens in the workplace (e.g. you feel that someone has made an offensive remark to you), take no more than 48 hours to assess it, seek guidance from an impartial, trusted advisor about it, and then either address it or drop it. After 48 hours, move on. Timing is critical.
- On a related note, familiarize yourself with your company's harassment/discrimination policies.
- Document, document, document! Always keep a paper trail. Recap verbal conversations via email.
- Stay strong, stay authentic, and know that you are not alone. There are many of us who have come before you. We want you to be happy and successful, and we will help you along the way. When in doubt, seek the counsel of a trusted mentor/advisor. We love you, little sisters.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR / DANIA FRINK

A lifelong creative, Dania W. Frink has worked across the spectrum of the arts. She is the Founder/Creative Director of PEN + FRINK, an illustration, design and animation studio in Jacksonville, FL. Previously, Dania held Communications, Marketing, External Relations and Teaching roles in both the public and private sectors. She enjoys discovering and creating new methods of fusing the arts, education, social justice, cultural preservation, and storytelling.

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