

Blacks happier at work than whites despite fewer friends, less autonomy

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Despite working in more routine and less autonomous jobs, having fewer close friends at work, and feeling less supported by their coworkers, blacks report significantly more positive emotions in the workplace than whites, according to a new study in the December issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

"We were surprised by this," said lead author Melissa M. Sloan, an assistant professor of interdisciplinary social sciences and sociology at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. "Based on the history of discrimination against African Americans in the workplace, we thought blacks would experience more negative emotions at work than whites. As it turned out, the opposite was true."

Titled, "Counting on Coworkers: Race, Social Support, and Emotional Experiences on the Job," the study considered more than 1,300 state government employees in Tennessee.

Sloan and her co-authors Ranae J. Evenson Newhouse, an assistant professor of sociology at Tennessee State University, and Ashley B. Thompson, an assistant professor of sociology at Lynchburg College, also found that the higher the percentage of minorities in a workplace, the more close friends blacks had and the fewer whites had.

In workplaces with a low percentage of minority employees—13 percent or less—black [workers](#) said they considered 39 percent of their coworkers to be close friends versus 61 percent for white workers.

However, in workplaces with a high percentage of minority employees—35 percent or more—black workers said they considered about 42 percent of their coworkers to be [close friends](#) versus 46 percent for white workers.

"What was surprising to us about these findings was that the percentage of minority workers in a workplace more strongly influenced the friendships of whites than blacks," Sloan said.

In addition, the study found that the more minorities in a workplace, the more negative emotions whites experienced at work. "This is a concern because the increased negative emotions of white workers in racially diverse workplaces can negatively impact the workplace atmosphere," Sloan said.

Sloan and her co-authors also discovered that while providing social support to coworkers negatively affected the emotional experiences of white workers, it was associated with increased levels of positive emotion among black workers. "By providing support to colleagues, black workers may feel valued and more integrated into the work environment," Sloan said. "In contrast, white workers who do not experience social isolation in the same way as black workers do, may find providing support to be a burden."

In terms of policy implications, Sloan said the study suggests that more research is needed to determine how to encourage people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop supportive relationships with each other. "Simply increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the [workplace](#) might not be enough to foster social connections between workers with different backgrounds and, in fact, may elicit [negative emotions](#) among members of the majority group," Sloan said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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