

# If you expect First Nations staffers to do all your 'Indigenous stuff,' it isn't support, it's racism

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Workplaces can be hostile, overwhelming and unwelcoming places for many First Nations Peoples. My research has explored how this is the

case in many organizations, including universities.

White organizations often expect First Nations People to take on additional unpaid work such as providing cultural expertise, educating colleagues and additional networking with First Nations organizations. Often this is done without the First Nations person being given any avenue to be promoted to a [leadership role](#).

White people can react negatively when a person of color questions or tries to change what [white people](#) consider common understandings. Due to these environments, it often feels like as academics, we're unable to examine complicated or complex issues caused by ongoing effects of colonization—such as racism.

## **Additional strain for First Nations Peoples**

It is not uncommon for First Nations academics to have complaints made about us when we discuss issues such as racism and whiteness. Because the concepts (us) make people feel ["uncomfortable."](#)

Because of the skills First Nations academics gain through education and our positions in universities, there is additional pressure from our families and communities to solve all of the [problems](#) we set out to address. However, we have limited power.

First Nations people are often not given opportunities for promotions by the [organization](#) they [work for](#). If we are in [leadership roles](#), we are undermined by white colleagues. However, when First Nations employees try to broach these issues with their [employer](#), we are frequently [ignored](#), framed as "difficult" or labeled a liar.

This can lead to what is called Indigenous [identity strain](#). This is the strain Indigenous employees feel when the perception of their identity is

seen as not meeting the expectations of the dominant culture in the workplace.

What is racial invisibility, and how do white people benefit from it?

"This invisibility leaves whiteness unnamed but ever present. It is the unspoken norm from which everyone else deviates."

[@LukeLPearson](#) [#IndigenousX](#) <https://t.co/n2y3FjP1CR>

— IndigenousX LTD (@IndigenousXLtd) [February 2, 2022](#)

## Identity strain

The consequences that come with this strain are significant:

- not being in leadership positions but expected to lead all things Indigenous-related
- lack of financial recognition for this, or recognition of the extra work hours
- high levels of stress navigating both professional and community roles
- having to be a cultural educator, capacity builder or cultural interpreter for colleagues and other staff—including more senior staff
- First Nations people are often not considered for promotions because working with Indigenous communities is often not valued, not seen as legitimate or essential to our roles. In addition, there is no support for Indigenous staff when undertaking community responsibilities
- when a non-Indigenous staff member is racist, the Indigenous staff member is sometimes expected to address this with no protection from the organization

Indigenous people having to undertake these additional tasks, and educate white people on the socio-political history of Australia can be traumatic for everyone involved. Often with the Indigenous person having to comfort the non-Indigenous person.

## **Cultural loads and emotional labor of First Nations people**

Cultural loads are the additional responsibilities carried by Indigenous Peoples such as health inequities, racism, socio-economic issues and cultural responsibilities. This can also include white people expecting us to represent and be responsible for all First Nations people. This can be detrimental when certain First Nations individuals act in certain ways—it becomes representative of all us.

Comparatively, white culture seems to not have these kinds of cultural loads. Whiteness does not have a universally accepted definition, and to be white is to be [invisible](#) or a neutral presence compared to people of color.

In addition to these cultural loads, there can be further pressures from white colleagues regarding cultural content.

It is often expected that we will:

- always be comfortable doing Acknowledgement of Country—or consistently asked to provide pronunciations and wording for said acknowledgements
- understand all the cultural norms of the Country we work on
- always be available to share our knowledge (including out of [work hours](#))
- be the Indigenous representative on every committee

- additional engagement with Indigenous students, clients, and families.

## How can whitefellas address this?

Although it is important to recognize white privilege, not getting paralyzed by white guilt is paramount. White guilt is motivated by recognition of unearned privilege but blocks critical reflection because white people end up feeling they are individually to blame for all forms of [racism](#).

However, white people must stop using "[good intentions](#)" to excuse lack of knowledge and understanding of diverse peoples' cultures and issues.

To be an effective ally, one must go beyond being well-intentioned actions, and perceived outcomes such as recognition for their efforts. What is critical is being conscious of values such as respect, humility, and commitment.

Allies are not wanted if they only want to be performative or being viewed by others as "supportive." Being dedicated to creating a world with justice and equity requires white people take accountability and responsibility. This includes self education about First Nations issues and learning to sit with the discomfort of uncomfortable truths.

If First Nations Peoples and People of Color are to have additional responsibilities or tasks in the workplace, we should be paid and compensated accordingly for the additional workload. Alternatively, there should be a designated person for that kind of work. In addition, more First Nations People must to be provided pathways to [leadership roles](#) .

To do this, organizations need to draw on the abilities, knowledges,

governance and leadership of First Nations Peoples without exploitation.

This requires commitment to social and structural change and investing in diversity and inclusion. It is vital for organizations to de-center whiteness and be more accessible for the cultural needs of First Nations Peoples.

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