

# Whether a racial minority or majority at their school, white teachers struggle with race relations

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In a study of white teachers' sense of belongingness at their schools, education professor Jennifer L. Nelson found that these teachers were often ill-equipped for discussions about racial issues with Black colleagues and students because they had little prior experience thinking about or confronting race in their family, educational and previous work environments. Credit: Fred Zwicky

White workers' emotions about race and reactions to racial differences in the workplace are triggered by identity threat-induced culture shock, researchers suggest in a new study.

White teachers who worked at a school where the faculty was majority Black felt shocked, rejected, uncomfortable and anxious when racial discussions arose and their racial or professional identities were challenged, the researchers found. When triggered by feeling different—regardless of whether they were a racial minority or majority in their workplace—white teachers responded by practicing social avoidance, shunning intergroup relations and ducking conversations about race.

"Most of the white teachers in our sample hailed from racially segregated social worlds—attending predominantly white high schools and universities" that left them unprepared to handle race relations in their workplace, said first author Jennifer L. Nelson, a professor of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, who co-wrote the study with Tiffany D. Johnson, a business professor at Georgia Institute of Technology.

[Published](#) in *Work and Occupations*, the findings were based on in-depth interviews and job-shadowing with 56 white teachers working in public high schools in a city in the southeast U.S. The study examined white teachers' sense of workplace belongingness at five metropolitan schools with either majority-white or majority-Black faculty members, as well as these teachers' emotional responses to being a different race from their coworkers and students.

The researchers said individuals' emotional responses to [racial differences](#) in the workplace are constructed in three stages, beginning with their racial socialization earlier in life, a formative process called imprinting; racialized emotions, their perceptions of a current race-

related event at work; and racialized coping, their behavioral reactions to that event.

Imprinting—which encompasses individuals' prior experiences with race in their family, educational and previous work environments—shapes young adults' preparedness to deal with race-related discussions and issues in the workplace, Nelson said.

"During the interviews, all the teachers referred back to these earlier experiences and compared them with their current workplace at the time when race became salient for them," Nelson said. "It was clear to my co-author and me that imprinting was relevant to the range of emotions they felt when race became something they had to grapple with at work. The white teachers also realized they had a [racial identity](#), too, even if they had not thought of it much in depth before."

White teachers who were minorities at their schools encountered various types of identity threats—behaviors or incidents that made them feel devalued or disliked based upon a social identity such as their race or profession. Some believed that Black students and coworkers viewed them as professionally incompetent. Others recalled being confronted by Black students who said they were unqualified to teach African American history because they were white.

White faculty members were surprised when their Black students commented about perceived cultural differences between them. However, some of these teachers also told the researchers they struggled to understand their students' circumstances and felt they could not communicate effectively with them, which left the teachers feeling inept and overwhelmed.

"White minority teachers were concerned about being perceived as prejudiced or racist and worried they would get in trouble if they said

the wrong thing to a Black student," Nelson said. White men, who comprised 25% of those in the sample, were particularly concerned that Black coworkers and students assumed they were bigots because of their race and sex—demographic characteristics they viewed as liabilities in diverse environments.

White teachers working in schools where the faculty was predominantly white who had previously worked in schools where the faculty was majority-Black said they were much happier and less stressed in their current jobs because they seldom had to think about race. Yet, regardless of which environment they worked in, both sets of teachers "reported difficulties managing their emotions when race became a topic of discussion at work," Nelson said.

Racialized coping encapsulated the strategies that white teachers in the study utilized to manage disturbing emotions, avert unwanted interaction with certain colleagues and otherwise avoid difficult conversations. Oftentimes, they practiced social avoidance.

These [coping strategies](#) "have the potential to reinforce [racial inequality](#) by fostering discrimination," the researchers wrote.

The study also found evidence of the concept of white fragility—defined as low tolerance for feelings of discomfort about race—such as white teachers forbidding their Black students to make comments that might offend white people, Nelson said.

Some teachers' strong emotional reactions to real or perceived identity threats offered protective benefits, saying these gave them license to respond with disparaging comments to Black students and faculty members. Moreover, the researchers observed troubling patterns of organizations enforcing few constraints on white faculty members' behavior and of white school principals protecting them when Black

parents accused them of unfair teaching practices.

To help aspiring teachers understand and prepare for these workplace interactions, Nelson said experiential learning such as "role plays could help [teacher](#) candidates reflect on their own identities and behavior, so they have actually thought about the way they were socialized, how their emotions affect their behavior and the views and expectations they bring to work."

Accordingly, Nelson suggested that long-term professional development programs could help sustain white teachers' consciousness of their racial group and the power imbalances—such as those between teachers and students—that occur in [school](#) environments.

**More information:** Jennifer L. Nelson et al, How White Workers Navigate Racial Difference in the Workplace: Social-Emotional Processes and the Role of Workplace Racial Composition, *Work and Occupations* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/07308884231176833](https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884231176833)

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