

Gender and Racial Expectations in the Workplace: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

I want to test the generalization that Eurocentric societies have come far, regarding how women and people of colour are treated in a professional setting. Are there more opportunities for marginalized groups and rules in place to combat discrimination? Are people more respectful of different genders and races? In this essay, I will compare two case studies: my own experiences as a young, mixed-race, Indo-Guyanese/French Canadian woman, working part-time jobs from 2018-2020, and those of my aunt, Jenny Rajaballey, who as an Indo-Guyanese immigrant woman (Jenny Rajaballey) had a successful career as a health executive from the 1990s to 2010s. I interviewed her using a questionnaire I composed. My goal was to study how the expectations of women, particularly of color, in the workplace have changed over time and how minimum wage jobs and administrative positions can be compared.

Keywords

Gender expectations, racial expectations, workplace, discrimination

To commence this discussion, I will start by describing one of Ms. Rajaballey's part-time jobs and compare her experience to mine. From 1980-81, at the age of 17, she worked part-time at a bakery in Kitchener, Ontario, where she noticed discriminatory behavior from customers, due to her race: "some customers treated other co-workers more friendly and politely. They really did not want to talk to me and asked other people for help. The bakery had a strong German heritage and I was the only person of color that worked there" (Jenny Rajaballey qtd. in Jasmine Rajaballey, 2).

I could relate to being clearly undesirable to a customer because of my appearance. I worked at a cinema for two years and I found that while the managers were very aware of diversity and seldom seemed sexist, some customers would refuse

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my services. For example, I was working at the box office one night with a white, male co-worker, who was a few years my senior. His till was occupied, and a customer, a white man who appeared to be in his 40s, approached mine and asked if I was available. As I was offering to serve him, my coworker's customers left, and the man immediately ignored me and asked my co-worker a question that was within my skillset to answer. We were working in the same position, and I will always wonder what made me seem less capable. Was it because I was female, brown, or appeared younger? What has led to the expectation that Ms. Rajaballey and I, generations apart, would be less capable of good customer service?

Behaviors that should, by law, not exist cannot be corrected. While this shows that decades later, racism and/or sexism are still prevalent in Canadian society, what has changed is the frequency of obviously discriminatory behavior. As a follow-up question, I asked Ms. Rajaballey how often customers refused her services and she stated: "It was every shift and at least 80% of the customers;". My encounters were maybe one or two per month. However, I cannot speak for every woman of colour, who was in my position, and being on the "fairer" end of brown, I know that I have some privilege.

Furthermore, today there is little opportunity to call out such micro-aggressions. Regardless of the governmental policy regarding minimum wage employees, the focus essentially remains on dealing with workplace violence. I was seldom informed of my right to refuse service, nor were the 50+ other employees at the cinema and the 12+ employees at my other place of work, a women's apparel store. It is, however, difficult to report or react to ambiguously racist or sexist actions, so speaking out can lead to mockery, nothing, or even negative consequences. I have heard and repeated the words: 'it's not worth it' many times.

In fact, it has been proven by Salvatore and Shelton in their 2007 psychological study that: "[people of colour] are particularly vulnerable to cognitive impairment resulting from exposure to ambiguous prejudice – a level that Whites may not even register," (814). It is relatively easier to cope with obvious racism and, I argue, sexism because a person is already prepared to deal with that situation (814). Of course, the mental toll of obvious racism is not to be ignored. Likewise, there can be the expectation that women in the workplace are compliant with sexual harassment.

While Ms. Rajaballey did not mention this in her interview (and I am glad to report that, to my knowledge, she has not had to deal with such situations), I have had some experience of this, when interacting with customers at the apparel store. Following the trend identified by Salvatore and Shelton, two of my experiences of such harassment and my reactions to these acts, differed greatly. Within the same shift, I had a high school aged male approach me during a busy time, hold up a piece of lingerie, and ask me to model it for him. As this was an obviously inappropriate comment and he was clearly trying to get a reaction from me, I looked him in the face and said: 'I don't have

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time for this,' and moved on. I did not report this behavior as it was busy, not worth it, and I was afraid to be reprimanded for being disrespectful. In a way, I fitted into the expectations of compliance and internalization.

The second man that harassed me acted more ambiguously. I was steam cleaning a garment and the entire time he hovered at an uncomfortable distance. I vocalized my discomfort, but my tone was light and friendly because I did not want to make a scene. He was also making comments about me and while they were not inherently inappropriate, the context was worrying to the point that a member of my management team noticed, without me having said anything. However, nothing was done to rectify the situation, other than my refusal to cash the man up, after steaming the garment. It is noteworthy that the shift was busy and there were many witnesses, yet I was the only one to take any action against this harassment.

As Bourabain states in her 2020 study on prejudice in academia:

This shows the maintenance of a culture naturalizing overt sexist practices that are tolerated both by men and women. Working in male stereotypical occupations pressures women to internalize gendered messages. They often decide to strategize their fit by not speaking up and playing by the rules of the game (Cockburn, 1991) (Bourabain 256).

While my job was not specifically male-dominated (the entire staff was comprised of women), this man had power: the power to complain about my service and the power to refuse to buy something which would reflect badly on me as an employee.

The previous sentiment of 'playing by the rules' and altering one's gender performance and racial habitus to fit workplace expectations was a motif in Ms. Rajaballey's career. After her master's degree, she held the position of, "Director of Rehabilitation Services" at a major Psychiatric Hospital in London, Ontario," from 1990-1993, and various roles in the Ontario Ministry of Health in Toronto from 1993-2003 (Jasmine Rajaballey, 2-4, Jenny Rajaballey). For a decade, Ms. Rajaballey found it helpful to erase her cultural differences in the workplace, so as to be more respected in an environment dominated by white men: "I did not exhibit any kind of cultural difference at work. I did not dress differently, [or] eat Guyanese food, and spoke with no accent [n]or use[d] colloquial language. I did not speak about coming from another country or having a different background;" (qtd. in Jasmine Rajaballey, 3).

Those strategies were to avoid microaggressions in the workplace and ensure that her directions would be followed by her staff, despite her obvious success in the position and the support of the CEO of the company (Jasmine Rajaballey, 3).

Like many career women at the time, she altered her gender performance: "We dressed in what was called the Power Suit, usually a dark colour, with a bow or some kind of tie. We wanted to dress like a man, to be part of their 'club'. It often worked that I seemed to get more respect in a suit," (Jenny Rajaballey qtd. in Jasmine Rajaballey, 4).

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I related to having to put on a one-of-the-guys type of front. This was how I gained respect and avoided harassment from male co-workers, when I first started my cinema job. Additionally, when I was applying for part-time jobs in 2017 at the age of 16, pretty much every website I looked up for first-time interviewees stated that you were most likely to get hired, if you did not dress or act femininely. Furthermore, interviewers seemed to enjoy my more stereotypically masculine skills, such as my black belt in Taekwon-Do.

That being said, the performances that were rewarded in my workplaces post-hiring were the opposite. Hyperfeminine behaviours, such as raising the pitch of my voice, making every statement a question, acting bubbly and innocent, and rarely speaking assertively were what gave me the most success in customer service. I was only able to avoid that front with the illusion of power, such as standing behind the guest services desk as opposed to the box office on the other side (when I was running them both), or if a member of management (usually male) backed up a claim I made. As I reminded my male managers many times: 'they don't want to hear it from me, even if I am repeating what you just said'.

Unfortunately, despite much-needed progress in the work environment regarding gender and race-based prejudices from the 1990s to the 2010s, women like Ms. Rajaballey were and are still undermined by their male counterparts. While diversity has been proven to be beneficial to labor markets and economic growth, by studies, such as Scarborough's, which used data available from 1980-2010 (17), it is not always appreciated in more conservative settings.

Similar to my previous example, behaviour, such as ignoring a capable woman of colour in lieu of her male peer was a running theme during Ms. Rajaballey's time as the Vice President at Cambridge Memorial Hospital and Grand River Hospital from 2003-2014 (Jenny Rajaballey). She recounted:

I think it continued to be that people were not comfortable with a woman of colour in authority. For instance, I was in charge of renovations and construction at the hospitals. When I met with contractors, they would still direct their comments and questions to my male staff, even though it was clear that I was the decision-maker (qtd. in Jasmine Rajaballey, 6).

It fascinates me that, within urban Ontario, at such a high professional level, in the early 2000s and 2010s, Ms. Rajaballey was still dealing with sexist and racial prejudices and how they were comparable to my own experiences a few years later in a minimum wage-level job.

In summary, while my case studies show a clear change in the frequency and perhaps the severity of sexist and racist expectations of and towards women in different levels of the workplace, there is much work to be done to rectify this unwarranted imbalance between genders and races in Eurocentric societies. There is

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no moral reason that a woman of colour should be denied the experience of respect and professionalism. This is no longer how the world works.

While there are structures in place, including an emphasis on diversity in the hiring stages of jobs by many companies, it should not stop there and, unfortunately, anonymous tip lines to human resources can only take one so far. While we may not yet have all the solutions: "...know that survival is not an academic skill... It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (Lorde, 114).

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