

Is It Racist To Not Want To Talk About Race?



A question that has come up in my work as an investigator, which prompted me to research the issue (and now blog about it), is: whether it is racist to *not* want to talk about race? And, what if someone takes it a step further, and judges or penalizes an employee for *wanting* to talk about race? Feeling uncomfortable speaking about race-related matters is one thing, but what we often see is that a reluctance to engage on these issues can often escalate, and transpire into negative treatment, as well as play into old cliches, myths, and stereotypes.

Take, for example, a racialized person who often raises concerns about potential discrimination in the workplace, or advocates for DEI matters. Later, this person applies for an internal role or promotion but is denied. They hear through the grapevine that they were denied because they are often vocal about race, or “make everything” about race. Would this be considered racial discrimination?

Silence and “Colour-Blindness”

Some people may believe that the best way to combat racism is to *stop* talking about race, and may say things like, “I accept every colour; pink, blue, and polka dot,” when no one actually is pink, blue, or polka dot. They possibly mean well and may believe that if we don’t see or talk about race, then there can’t be discrimination. However, research paints a different picture, as a 2021 *Dalhousie Law Journal* article points out:

...[T]he myth of “colour-blindness” leads us to deny the unavoidable reality of racism, and underscores our lack of understanding about what racism is. ... insisting that we just don’t see race silence(s) people of colour attempting to articulate the racism we face. ... [and] [i]f we stop using racial categories, ... “then we will not be able to identify racist policies.”

When we claim not to see race, we dismiss and silence the lived experiences of racialized people, by considering race (and therefore, racism) to be a non-issue. We then lose the ability to identify the policies and practices that sustain inequities. In other words, refusing to talk about race doesn’t make racism go away; it just delays addressing issues and makes racism harder to identify and challenge.

Myths and Other Harmful Stereotypes

Comments can escalate from saying that one does not “see” race and become more personal in nature; for example, someone may describe the person who is raising matters of race as “angry,” “sensitive,” “difficult,” and therefore, reduce interactions with them. At first glance, that might sound like a matter of “fit” or “attitude.” However, raising issues of race is not a personal quirk or preference; it’s tied to someone’s identity and lived experience.

Further, human rights tribunals in Canada have recognized that when racialized people speak up about discrimination, their concerns are often met with suspicion or ridicule. In *Francis v. BC Ministry of Justice (No. 5)*,¹ the *British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal* found that a Black employee who raised concerns about racism was dismissed as “too sensitive” and accused of “playing the race card.” The Tribunal described how these myths and misconceptions create a “climate that prevent[s] any kind of effective response to racial inequality.”

Similarly, in *Correia v. York Catholic District School Board*,² an employer decided not to hire a racialized applicant in part because they believed he would “always make things about discrimination” if things didn’t go his way. The Tribunal found that reasoning to be racially discriminatory; it relied on the stereotype that racialized people use accusations of racism manipulatively, rather than in good faith. This not only dismisses the person’s experience and concerns, but labels them as dishonest.

These cases demonstrate that assuming someone who talks about race is “trouble,” “angry,” or any similar term, is itself rooted in racial bias.

Impact

Avoiding, silencing, or negatively labelling racialized people for raising race-related concerns demonstrates that their perspective is unwelcome, and it also reflects deeper stereotypes about how society perceives racialized people. These stereotypes delegitimize valid emotions and concerns, and can have real consequences, like being passed over for jobs or promotions. They’re making a decision based, at least in part, on racialized stereotypes about what it means to be “professional” and “collaborative.”

These subtle stereotypes have a cumulative effect and impact. They discourage racialized people from speaking up and reinforce a culture where discussions about equity are framed as divisive rather than necessary.

Final Thoughts

Let’s return to our example involving a person who is passed over for a promotion because they are often vocal about race, or “make everything” about race. Taking an adverse action based on a negative impression of a person who is vocal about race or “makes everything” about race, whether consciously or unconsciously, is directly related or linked to the person’s race and therefore, would likely be considered racial discrimination.

While it may not be discriminatory to avoid talking about race in the workplace, this may create a climate that keeps inequity intact and prevents any kind of effective response to racial inequities. If the desire for silence comes from discomfort, defensiveness, or fear of being called out – it might not start as racism. But when that silence results in punishing, excluding, or devaluing those who raise race-related issues, it becomes discriminatory. Silence, in this sense, is not neutral. When treating someone who is racialized negatively, in part, due to them being vocal about race, the person would have a good argument for discrimination because:

- raising matters related to race is tied to one's lived experience and identity;
- penalizing someone for raising race may reflect bias or stereotyping (i.e., "playing the race card" or the stereotype that racialized people will be difficult, confrontational, or manipulative); and
- it effectively delegitimizes their concerns, and silences and discourages discourse and change about race-related issues, which negatively impacts racialized people.

In order to build a stronger workplace culture, organizations should encourage honest and open conversations and take the time to listen, reflect, and investigate when necessary. If one finds themselves feeling reluctant to engage in the discussion, consider why, and consider any biases or myths that may be contributing to that reluctance.

Footnotes

1. 2021 BCHRT 16 (CanLII).
2. 2011 HRT0 1733 (CanLII).

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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