

## Evaluating “Professionalism” in Modern Organizations

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### I. Case Overview:

This case discusses organizational communication theories, such as professionalism, hegemony, disciplinary Power, and antiracism, and how they impact organizations and their members. Nadia Hernandez is a Mexican-American immigrant who experienced discrimination under the guise of professionalism during her time working in various organizations. On multiple occasions, Hernandez was criticized and othered for her cultural practices and norms that did not coincide with white professionalism. After bringing these concerns up with her superiors and not being heard, Hernandez decided to quit her job. While companies insist these standards are without racial bias, workers of color feel like these standards of professionalism strip them of their cultural and personal identity as these aspects of themselves are now seen as improper.

### II. Learning Objective

This case study examines how professionalism harms workers of color.

### III. Case Narrative:

Adapted from: Hernandez, N. (n.d.-b). *Grads of Life BrandVoice: White “Professionalism” Limits Diverse Employees’ Belonging*. Forbes.

*The following narrative occurs in the office setting between author Nadia Hernandez, her coworker Ben, and their Boss, Mary.*

BEN: Hey Nadia, could I speak to you before the meeting?

HERNANDEZ: Hey, Ben. Yes, of course, we can talk.

BEN: Well, this meeting is a big deal, and it's essential to be as businesslike as possible.

HERNANDEZ: Yes, Ben, I agree. I'm not sure why you're bringing this up.

BEN: Sometimes, you can be a bit loud and overexcited, which is not how we do things here.

HERNANDEZ: My enthusiasm is just a part of who I am; in my culture, it's normal.

BEN: Yes, well, it's not a part of this culture, and the guys in this meeting want everyone to take this material seriously.

HERNANDEZ: Hmmmm, I see.

BEN: I'm so glad you understand; maybe just sit back in the meeting.

HERNANDEZ: I will try my best to keep my enthusiasm under wraps.

Part Two:

HERNANDEZ: Excuse me, Mary, could I speak to you about something that made me uncomfortable?

MARY: Of course, Nadia, go ahead.

HERNANDEZ: Earlier today, before the big meeting, Ben pulled me aside and said I should keep my head down in the meeting because I often get over-excited during meetings, and it can be off-putting. Being loud and expressive is common in my culture, reflecting engagement, not immaturity. I wondered if we could discuss ways to make the workplace more inclusive to workers of color.

MARY: Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Nadia. The company loves and values the diversity our employees bring to the table, but there are ways things are done in the corporate world, and that's the way it's always been. I'm sure Ben had the best intentions, and it bothers me that you would accuse him of being discriminatory. Does what I'm saying make sense?

HERNANDEZ: Yes, I understand entirely.

#### IV. Key Concepts:

**Professionalism:** A set of standards used to shape and legitimize behaviors in the workplace.

**Hegemony:** Leadership or dominance based on the exception of power structures by the subordinate.

**Disciplinary Power:** Internalized Power occurs when individuals discipline their behavior to fit the norm of their environment.

**Anti-Racism:** A sociological theory that attempts to dismantle racism through education and active participation against racist practices.

V. Theoretical Briefing:

**Professionalism** historically is described as a means to support the individual and the stability of society without the influence of governmental bureaucracies (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Marshall, 1950; Tawney, 1921). Professionalism was created as a set of standards and works to shape and legitimize appearance, behavior, and decorum during everyday activities within the workplace (Cheney & Lee Ashcraft, 2007). Professionalism is a form of individualized internal self-regulation that creates and maintains a set of codes and ethics that encourage cooperation instead of competition (Dingwall, 2008; Freidson, 2001). Fournier describes professionalism as instilling "appropriate" work identities and practices. Fournier believes this is done not through direct control but through a network of accountability that encourages these practices (Fournier, 1999).

Professionalism in everyday language is treated as an unbiased or neutral term, but it calls upon undisclosed cultural assumptions that, while they are not universal, are treated as such (Cheney & Lee Ashcraft, 2007). According to Cheney and Ashcraft, professionalism in popular culture is multi-dimensional and not universal amongst all cultures and identities. While there are understood aspects of professionalism, they are not universally the same, which can cause discourse between the individual and the symbolic term (Cheney & Lee Ashcraft, 2007). This standard of practice can also induce a greater sense of emotional labor while within the workplace. Because professionalism comes with the assumption that individuals will work with a "rational" performance and minimal expression, employees take on a more significant load of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983).

**Hegemony** is based on the idea that individuals are ruled by ideas, not force (Turin, 1966). Hegemony is defined as leadership based on the consent of the subordinate or the ruled class through popularizing a particular worldview (Bates, 1975). Murphy offers the perspective that

hegemony is a process where the dominant group convinces another group to accept subordination as usual (Murphy, 2017). Stuart Hall believes hegemony is not about domination but how ideas are circulated as common sense. Hall's definition of hegemony focuses not on how the dominant group gains control over the subordinate but on how each group participates in the dominant idea or worldview (Hall, 1980, as cited in Wood, 1998).

Hegemony in the cultural sense is when historically consent has been given by the subordinate, making the dominant group or idea appear logical or like common sense (Bates, 1975). Deetz and Mumby also believe that hegemony is not achieved through coercion or control but through the subordinate giving consent to the dominant idea in everyday practices, even if it does not serve or harm them (Deetz & Mumby, 1985). Within the historical and cultural context of hegemony, Gramsci believed that the subordinates must be actively committed to legitimizing the dominant group or ideologies' power. According to Gramsci, being actively committed does not always mean being conscious of one's actions but acting within the implicit values forged by society (Gramsci, 1929-1935, as cited in Mumby 1997).

Disciplinary Power is a power term used to describe constant and internalized Power that happens when individuals willingly discipline their ideas and actions to fit the norm of the organization they are a part of (Foucault, 1969 as cited in Lilja & Vinthagen 1996). In organizational communication, the primary tools used to exert Power over someone are language and other forms of communication (Murphy, 2017). Murphy offers the perspective of the overarching power theory to understand disciplinary Power better. Power is symbolic and can be leveraged through spoken and unspoken language, meaning that the everyday language used within an organization contributes to creating and maintaining its power structure, even if it is not explicit (Murphy, 2017). Power is also interwoven through an organization's structure (Mumby, 1988).

Disciplinary Power behaves within an organization through discursive forms of communication where the subordinate accepts the dominant group's Power and actively participates in it (Foucault, 1969, 1976, 1980, as cited in Schenk). Deetz and Foucault agree that people are not

vehicles of Power but contribute to power structures by how they are affected by it and how that affects others (Deetz, 1992). This idea bleeds into how disciplinary Power works within an organization and how it contributes to pre-existing power structures. Disciplinary Power normalizes behavior within individuals until the whole begins to behave in the same way (Foucault, 1991, as cited in Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014).

**Antiracism** is a term used to describe the theories and practices that individuals participate in to combat racist ideology (Sefa Dei, 1996) actively. To understand antiracism, an understanding of race must be had; race is defined as a sociological theory that signifies and symbolizes conflicts concerning human bodies and appearances (Winant, 2000). According to Winant, race must be looked at through a historical and political lens to accurately understand concepts of race and how they work from a communication standpoint (Winant, 2000). The discourse around professionalism and organizational communication has been recognized as raced, meaning professional spaces have long been designed for whites instead of people of color, confirming that to create an inclusive workplace, antiracist approaches must be taken (Marshall, 1939, as cited in Bates, 1975). According to Hopson and Orbe, professional spaces have been designed around the needs of whites and work to elevate white voices and, in doing so, increase stress and tension for people of color (Hopson & Orbe, 2007). For example, there have been numerous studies about the systematic racism that exists within the hiring process for organizations and how, because of this, people of color are excluded from the workplace (Henry & Ginzberg, 1985, as cited in Dei, 1996).

Race literature indicates that people of color are dehumanized within white-dominated spaces (Ferguson & Dougherty, 2021). Fanon concluded that people of color become humanized the closer they assimilate to white culture and white behavior. The more a person of color strips away their identity, the easier it is for them to succeed professionally (Fanon, 2008). Due to this phenomenon, people of color claim to alter their behavior and practices within a professional setting due to the tension surrounding their race (Seymour & Seymour, 1979). Anti-race literature suggests that to combat these ideologies, individuals must look at the ways institutions

and societal structures perpetuate racist practices (Dei, 1996). Because racist actions or beliefs are not always intentional, antiracism focuses on an educational approach to how to identify racist norms (Dei, 1996).

## VI. Questions

1. Where within the narrative do you see hegemony? What evidence is there to argue your point?
2. What evidence exists that disciplinary Power exists within this organization? How might disciplinary Power behave within an organization?
3. How might having characters within the narrative utilize antiracist techniques?
4. Where can you see the concept of professionalism within the narrative?
5. How do professionalism and antiracism connect

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