

## **‘I was exhausted, and there was no break at all’: how Black women leadership coaches understood and navigated workplace tensions after the racial reckoning**

**Angela D. Carter<sup>1</sup>, Stephanie Sisco<sup>2</sup> and Rubina F. Malik<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Educational and Organisational Leadership Development, Clemson University

<sup>2</sup>Department of Organisational Leadership, Policy, and Development,  
University of Minnesota

<sup>3</sup>Division of Business Administration and Economics, Morehouse College

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### **Abstract**

The racial reckoning that occurred after the murder of George Floyd and the remote workplace dynamics created by the pandemic contributed to the tension that many Black professionals felt. Despite the efforts to maintain professionalism and collegiality, organisations did little to assuage the racial reckoning beyond pledges to initiate social justice and racial equity organisational change. This paper aims to help build a body of literature that acknowledges the unique vantage point of those with overlapping marginalised identities and, in particular, we examine the ways in which seven Black women leadership coaches understood and navigated workplace tensions after the racial reckoning. Through their coaching, these leadership coaches were able to help Black leaders build their capacities and improve their performance. Using armouring, they were also able to facilitate conversations about race within their organisations toward developing policies and practices that would help them move toward racial equity.

*Keywords: leadership coaching, racial reckoning, diversity, equity, and inclusion*

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### **Introduction**

Nine minutes and 29 seconds of police brutality ended George Floyd’s life on a Minneapolis, Minnesota street on 25 May 2020. After his murder was live streamed around the globe, the resulting racial justice protests and calls for police accountability and oversight catalysed heightened attention and sensitivity towards racism in America. Seventy per cent of leading Fortune 500 companies responded through social media messaging that demonstrated varying levels of support (Sternbenk et al., 2021). These posts expressed

empathy and acknowledged the pervasiveness of racism in their organisations, although few acted beyond pledges to initiate social justice and racial equity organisational change (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020; Ruggs & Avery, 2020). Since that time, there has been a spike in racial discourse and a growing interest to learn what has transpired post-George Floyd (Bohonos & Sisco, 2021; Gomes, 2021; Morse, 2021). Clearly, the magnitude of the event and its demonstrated impact has led many to characterise the incident as a crucial turning point in race relations in our workplaces, politics, and in society. We (the researchers) also share this understanding and choose to refer to this event as a racial reckoning and define it as renewed efforts to expose and confront structural racism, racial inequity, and social injustice experienced by Black Americans.

Despite the racial reckoning magniloquence of justice, dignity, and equality for all, regardless of race, gender, religion, or creed (Meikle 2020), results from a recent study found that one out of four Black employees experienced workplace discrimination in 2021, and three out of four Black women believed their discrimination involved their race – not just their gender (Lloyd, 2021). With this in mind, our aim is to help build a body of literature that acknowledges the unique vantage point of those with overlapping marginalised identities. Thus, we take this opportunity to deepen our understanding through an examination of the way Black women leadership coaches approached their work and addressed workplace tensions after the racial reckoning. As there has been virtually no research on race-conscious executive and leadership coaching practices and the experiences of racial minority coaches, current circumstances have presented the opportunity for traditionally overlooked voices and race-related workplace issues to be included in coaching and leadership scholarship, especially as it relates to continued oppression against Black professionals.

The present article is the second to derive from a 2021 study of Black women leadership coaches. In a previous article (Carter et. al., in press), we explored the means by which seven Black women coaches navigated the intersections of race and gender in their leadership and coaching practices. In writing this article, we were interested in particular in the stories the women told of coaching after the racial reckoning. Due to their unique positionality borne of their intersectional identities, these coaches were witness to the effects organisational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts had on their clients and themselves. Thus, we formulated an overarching research question: What, if anything, can be said of how Black women leadership coaches understood and navigated workplace tensions after the racial reckoning? We use the

intersectionality of race and gender and the concept of tension to guide our inquiry.

### **Workplace tension: centering the experience of Black women leaders**

Encountering some form of tension at work is simply part of the human experience, but there is evidence that suggests some groups experience workplace tension more than others. Some scholars argue that white supremacy and sexism disproportionately impact Black women in the current workforce (Cortina, 2008; Kilgore et al., 2020). Whether the focus is on highly educated Black women or Black professional women, studies have consistently shown they are subjected to organisational policies and workplace cultures that attempt to regulate their Blackness and femininity (Rabelo et al., 2021; Shorter-Good, 2004; Smith, 1999). Formal restrictions on how Black women can style their hair at work (Dawson et al., 2019; Donahoo & Smith, 2022; Lewellen & Bohonos, 2019), for instance, are poorly justified attempts to constrain the professional identity of Black women. These types of limitations vary from prohibiting natural protective styles (e.g., braids, twists, cornrows, etc.) to policies that suggest Black women are discouraged from having blonde hair at work (Greene, 2017).

Other forms of scrutiny against Black women relate to stereotypes about their temperament (i.e. “mad Black women,” “angry Black women,” “hypersensitive,” “sassy,” etc.) (Holder et al., 2015; Sisco, 2020), which is not limited to the tone-policing of their facial expressions (i.e., “Your faces are making me uncomfortable”) (Rabelo et al., 2021). Studies have also indicated that it is common for Black women to receive verbal and non-verbal messages that question their intellectual capabilities (i.e. “You do not belong” and “You are abnormal.”) (Smith & Nkomo, 2003; Sue et al., 2008). Unfortunately, these projections of Black women are demeaning even on occasions when stereotypes are intended to be positive, such as the belief that all Black women are strong and assertive. This type of thinking imposes masculine qualities on Black women and, similar to the other stereotypes mentioned, it portrays them as having a monolithic experience (Geyton et al., 2022; Smith & Nkomo, 2003).

### **Microaggressions**

Because of the unfavourable bias against Black women, Kilgore and colleagues (2020) explained that they experience microaggressions that result in constant surveillance of their work, which can be destructive to their mental

health and career progression. Microaggressions, when directed towards racial minorities, can be interpreted as put-downs and hostile, yet low-key non-verbal gestures of discontent aimed at people of colour (Pierce et al., 1978). In some cases, routine cycles of microaggressions can potentially hinder the confidence of Black women (Hall et al., 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2014), push them to disengage with their colleagues (Williams & Lewis, 2019), and adversely interfere with their ambitions to pursue leadership positions (Holder et al., 2015).

### **Modern-day discrimination**

Working in these types of conditions creates a segregated workplace and it can be interpreted as a form of modern-day discrimination (Hall et al., 2012). Cortina (2008) cautioned that workplace incivility can progress to selective incivility, which is when a specific social group is targeted or purposefully excluded; and therefore, it qualifies as a form of racism and sexism in the workplace. When all the above is considered, having the ability to recognize the different levels and degrees of workplace tension may be helpful for organisational leaders to intervene to support the well-being and advancement of Black women in the workplace.

### **Social support and resilience of Black women in the workplace**

The resilience needed to overcome workplace conflict and stress can seem overwhelming and can trigger a sense of powerlessness for some Black women (Malveaux, 2019), especially when their experience is being questioned or minimised. Thus, some might argue that Black women do not fully experience the tensions that they encounter at work. Ponce de Leon and Rosette (2022) recently tested this hypothesis and found that “Black women’s gender and racial discrimination claims [are] believed less than those made by White women and Black men”.

Considering this, Black women could benefit from more support in the workplace. Research suggests Black women experience setbacks and trauma but have fewer resources of support to help them cope and push through the tensions they encounter at work (Hall et al., 2012; Holder et al., 2018). Some scholars have realised that this fact is especially pertinent for Black women seeking leadership positions, and they argue that Black women’s dual-subordinated identities place them up against the “concrete ceiling,” as opposed to the “glass ceiling” endured by White women in corporate America and higher education seeking to elevate their status (Miller & Vaughn, 1997). Thus,

Black women need allies from their colleagues, including those in management, their peers, and co-workers. Black women could benefit from the support of other Black women as well. When social support is inaccessible, spirituality and religion (Holder et al., 2015), and self-help (i.e., critical reflection and continued learning and development, etc.) and self-care (i.e., vacationing and pampering) (Terhune, 2008) have been known to be common approaches to help Black women de-stress, but there are other strategies that have gone unnoticed.

### **Leadership coaching**

Particularly, leadership coaching is a way for Black women to share their vulnerabilities with experts who assist their clients with identifying sustainable habits to navigate challenging situations and achieve a greater sense of well-being. Leadership coaching has been a promising intervention for developing leaders involving a one-on-one relationship where coaches help executives and managers improve their leadership effectiveness (Bono et al., 2009; Day, 2000, Ely et al., 2010; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014). The coaching relationship is one “in which the coachee and coach collaborate to assess and understand the coachee and his or her leadership developmental tasks, to challenge current constraints while exploring new possibilities, and to ensure accountability and support for reaching goals and sustaining development” (Ting & Hart, 2004, p. 116). The efficacy of this developmental relationship owes to its adaptive nature and the way it attends to the flexible individualized needs of leaders and organisations (Bono et al., 2009, Carter, et al., 2022; Ely et al., 2010).

That the intersection of leadership and race can lead to various forms of discrimination and stereotyping that disadvantage them from attaining higher positions (Madden, 2005), it is troubling that the field of leadership coaching has been race-agnostic, with diversity, critical, or cross-cultural coaching seldom studied in the literature. Of late, however, there have been two promising streams of inquiry focused on the experiences of coaches with minoritised identities, namely, Filsinger’s (2021) work on increasing the field of diversity in coaching and Maltbia and Power’s (2005) diversity impact on the process of coaching. Lacking is the explicit focus on both clients and coaches with minoritised identities, specifically Black women.

It could be more advantageous for Black women to be coached by Black women leadership coaches because of their shared history of racism and sexism that is contextualized through an Afrocentric point of reference. Black women

coaches often have experienced or continue to experience the same injustices that their clients now face at work. However, the accumulated stress and oppression from the myriad cultural, social, and historical factors that have affected them have made it that much more challenging for these women to coach (Carter et. al., in press). Therefore, even as Black women leadership coaches provide guidance to other Black women and other organisational stakeholders, they are still at risk of experiencing workplace tension.

### **Method**

Our study seeks to better understand how seven Black women leadership coaches perceived the workplace tensions that existed during a critical period of racial upheaval for themselves, their clients and the organisations they interacted with. We explore how they made sense of these tensions. Simultaneously, we interrogate their roles in racial, social justice, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in organisations in the wake of the racial reckoning. We use race, gender, and intersectionality to guide our phenomenological inquiry and explore the overlapping cultural and social factors within the methodological design and analytical framework (Crenshaw, 1988).

An interpretative phenomenological and hermeneutic approach was used to examine the lived experiences of participants (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Our inquiry question is: What, if anything, can be said of how Black women leadership coaches understood and navigated workplace tensions after the racial reckoning? In answering this question, we place power with Black women leaders to provide their personal narratives in addressing the ways in which coaching and leadership coexisted in a racialized workplace environment.

### **Research design**

The goal of a phenomenological study is to describe people's lived experiences and to gain insight into the thoughts, feelings, and meaning-making of those who have experienced them (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). We used an interpretive phenomenological approach and an intersectional lens to guide our inquiry which lends itself to exploring how coaches give meaning to their coaching experience (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009), and can provide insight

into the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented populations (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

### Participants

We used a purposive criterion sampling procedure (Patton, 2014) in which participants met the following participation standards: (a) identify as Black women, (b) have an internal or external coaching practice, and (c) have previous leadership experience in the workplace. To ensure confidentiality, participants (N = 7) were given or chose pseudonyms to protect themselves and to conceal individual and organisation identities. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed by Rev.com. The average age of the participants was 48 years old. All participants had at least a Master's degree along with their coaching certifications. In addition, the length of time coaching spanned from seven to 40 years. Three coaches were external only, meaning they contracted outside of formal organisations, while the others coached as part of their roles within organisations, while maintaining external coaching businesses. The table below provides the demographic information about the Black women coaches.

Table 1 Demographic information

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Coaching experience</b>	<b>Leadership experience</b>	<b>Coaching practice internal/external/both</b>
<b>Andrea</b>	62	MBA; honorary D. Law	10 years of formal coaching experience and 40 years across career	Vast international leadership experience and former chief human resources officer or a multinational healthcare company	Internal and external coach
<b>Isley</b>	51	Masters	20 years' coaching experience	Currently in a leadership role in DEI education	Internal and external coach
<b>Khadijah</b>	54	Masters	8 years of coaching experience	Leader learning and development roles since the 1990s prior to starting practice	External coach

<b>Mandisa</b>	43	MBA	5 years of formal coaching experience and 20 years across career	Senior level leader responsible for learning and development, talent management, and DEI	Internal and external coach
<b>Maxine</b>	37	Masters	7 years of coaching experience	Extensive leadership roles prior to starting practice	External coach
<b>Nicole</b>	42	PhD	16 years of coaching experience	Formerly in academic leadership roles	External coach
<b>Sage</b>	50	EdD	7 years of coaching experience	Dean at a technical college for 10 years. Self-described radical Black academic	Internal and external coach

**Data analysis**

Phenomenological studies require rich data sets that provide detailed accounts of the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). We noticed after analysing data from our previous study that there were several questions that specifically spoke to the coaches' experiences and thoughts on the workplace and their coaching practices in the aftermath of the racial reckoning that could be addressed in greater detail. The interviews took place in August 2021, sixteen months into the racial reckoning. The data derived from the chosen interview questions (below) were analysed using a critical hermeneutic lens in our iterative thematic and interpretive process (Patton, 2002).

Table 2 Interview questions

<p>What if any experiences have you had with discussing racism, anti-racism in your coaching practice since the racial reckoning?                  In what ways did this experience influence you emotionally, physically, cognitively, socially?                  How do you talk about racism, discrimination, code-switching, etc. when coaching?</p>
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Themes were grouped together into shared meanings, while being mindful of the unique and varied participant experiences (Van Manen, 1994). In this manner, representative core categories were developed and codified using an emerging list of higher-level themes, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Sample of higher level themes

<b>Core categories</b>	<b>Higher level themes</b>
Understanding Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching engagements increased</li> <li>• More frequent dialogue around DEI</li> <li>• Performative corporate wokeness</li> </ul>
Navigating Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biculturalism</li> <li>• Stress and emotional labour</li> <li>• Code switching &amp; microaggressions</li> <li>• Armouring</li> </ul>

The final step in the analytical process was to develop a ‘dialogue’ between the data and the emergent themes shaped by the interpretive account of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, since an interpretive phenomenological hermeneutic methodology requires data analysis that is focused on moving beyond the description and into the interpretation of the phenomenon (Frechette et al, 2020), our findings and discussions are presented together to aid in the analysis.

### **Discussion of findings**

We focused on seven Black leadership coaches and their experiences of the coaching landscape and workplace environment. The women shed light on some of the common tensions they faced in the workplace in the year after the racial reckoning, and how they made sense of those tensions for themselves, their clients, and sponsoring organisations. The coaches revealed the ways in

which they understood and navigated the tensions they experienced in a racially charged workplace.

### **Understanding the tensions**

For Black women, tension is a normal part of existing in the workplace. However, during and after the racial reckoning, the coaches felt the tension in having to be present in more conversations around race on behalf of their clients as well as in the organisations that sponsored the coaching. From the coaches' purview, both they and their Black clients were increasingly asked to be in diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations. Andrea noted that the DEI interest contributed to an increase in coaching requests: "in just about all of our clients' systems I was doing coaching [and] every single firm wanted to go down this path of a diversity strategy."

Maxine estimated she spent quite a bit of time in her coaching practice discussing race with her clients.

My guess is that [it] happens pretty regularly. Because my clients are often the only Black person, or one of two or three in their departments, sometimes in their whole companies. If they're an executive coaching client, there're usually not very many of them. So the way that they navigate conversations it has to from their perspective include an understanding of how people see them culturally and what place those people feel like they have. And even if my clients are trying to burst out of that they have to have a strategy of how to approach those kinds of conversations. So I feel like it comes up a lot.

The coaches found that it became easier to hold safe and generative conversations concerning race, and there was more of an opportunity to coach Black men, women, and other people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Many of them felt that the new dialogue around race was positive, and they were grateful to be able to provide resources and give voice to Black leaders, since this was not the experience they had when they were in the workplace as leaders. This ability to give voice to other Black leaders was both an empowering and enjoyable experience for Maxine because she felt that Black people have been silenced, and coaching was her way of giving back. "Even though it wasn't something that I knew was going to happen, I'm grateful that I

get to give back to so many Black leaders who need someone that they can call on.”

Mandisa translated the tensions she felt to a way she could influence pipeline access for women of colour in her organisation:

How can I influence diversity and inclusion? How can I coach my leadership? How can I coach them to be inclusive through a different lens? Opening up the conversation and bringing that group into the discussion means that I have an opportunity to put more visibility and build a larger network for some of those women of colour in our organisation.

Yet even though many of the organisations the coaches worked with purported to be very concerned about what was happening within the country and wanted to influence their organisations in meaningful ways, the race-related conversations were short-lived and unproductive. Some said that conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were at an all-time high but after the protests stopped, the public relations appeal wore off and these conversations trailed off once again. Isley noted:

With George Floyd being murdered and everyone being at home watching it on television, coaching became very important because it wasn't just about solutions anymore. It wasn't just about what solutions can our company provide to your organisation. It was about having conversations with leaders saying, "What do you expect for this to do for your organisation? Because we can sell you a whole lot of stuff, but we want to make sure that we're being responsible in how we are showing up in your space and sharing information and having people have conversations around the topic of race, equity, inclusion, diversity, all those aspects." So, yeah, tenfold it increased.

Isley touched on the fact that the coaches understood that they held a particular vantage, and their guidance to organisations was critical towards meaningful change in DEI strategy and the wellbeing of the marginalized employees they worked with as coaches.

### **Emotional fatigue**

While dialogue about race can be beneficial, it can also bring out emotional fatigue. The coaches had strong emotions around being put in situations where they had to help clients work through racist situations, but had no outlet for their own frustrations. Some of these problems addressed in the coaching sessions with clients during this time were triggering for the coaches.

This led the coaches to be angry, sad, and frustrated, like many others who witnessed racial inequity at the hands of police and the performative allyship within the organisational response. The coaches felt the wearing effects of having to be “on” during the racial reckoning. Thus, the additional emotional and cognitive labour load in Andrea’s sentiment, “I was exhausted, and there was no break at all” was felt by all of the coaches.

Khadijah similarly acknowledged that for her, the racial reckoning brought out difficult to understand emotions of “anger, frustration, heartache, distrust, perseverance, resilience, a willingness to keep fighting.” According to Gilbert (2001), emotions are often experienced in a way that is culturally defined and socially restrained. Emotions, particularly those concerning race, are “more than physiological sensations, but are often experienced in this way. They guide our interpretation of what we experience and are shaped by our life experience” (Gilbert 2001, p. 10).

### **Real change is an illusion**

Another tension experienced by the participants came in the form of frustration about the disadvantageous systems in place. Further, they were witness to White men and women employees getting access to coaching and professional development during the racial reckoning, but the Black women leaders were not considered for these opportunities. Due to their race and gender, Black women tend to have fewer opportunities both inside and outside work to participate in social and professional interactions that build alliances (Bova, 2000). Instead, emerging Black leaders who grappled with the realities of their work lives contacted them without organisational sponsorship (Byrd & Stanley, 2009), often paying on their own for coaching. Perceptions by the Black women coaches were that Black people were provided too few opportunities no matter what they did. Organisations espouse (what they think they do) that “leadership talent is critical and scarce, [and] organisations cannot afford to underutilize any segment of the talent pool” (Catalyst, 2004) but their theory in use (what they actually do) is to provide inadequate support for

designating Black women leaders as “high potential” talent to have access to coaching opportunities (Carter, et. al, 2022).

For many, there was a rather guarded and jaded view from years spent as the only Black leaders in organisations. For Mandisa, the ability to have these conversations around race was illusory:

Our privilege as Black people to talk about inequity was sort of unleashed, but here's the burn. We can talk about it. We can write about it on LinkedIn. We can like things in social media. We can talk about these things at work. Things aren't changing at work, but we can talk about things that aren't changing more at work. For me, that's where I feel the opposite of having power. It's fake power, you know? I can share my grievances, but no one has to do anything about them.

Mandisa and other Black women coaches seemed to be deeply affected by the lingering trauma and feelings put upon them that suggest they are “part of the problem” (Du Bois, 1996), analogous to DuBoisan ‘twoness’. In the *Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois’ seminal work from over 100 years ago, he writes: “[o]ne ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 1994, p.2).

### **Double consciousness**

This double-consciousness describes both the external and internal dynamics that result from having an awareness of two cultural contexts (one Black, the other white), each of which is shaped by vastly different socio-historical conditions, including racism and sexism (Bell, 1990). Mandisa feels ‘twoness’ and also the stress of living in two worlds. For her, the stress and pressure brought on by the racial reckoning and resultant strained relationships within her organisation led to insomnia, and eventually to feelings of self-doubt:

I actually find that . . . I don't sleep. It's humiliating to say it, but it's just the truth, and I don't think it's right. I think that there's a reason why, someone is creating that sort of experience, and I'm responding to it that way, but for some reason it still feels, "Why can't I be Teflon? Why can't I just go to bed, get a

good night's rest, wake up and do it again?", but the stress and the emotional pressure is a lot.

There is ample evidence that poor self-rated health outcomes, psychological distress, and restricted access to resources and other detriments can occur in Black women who get trapped in the never-ending struggle of having to constantly prove their worth (Bell, 1990) and who perceive they need to remain strong under racial and economic discrimination at any cost (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2021).

### **Navigating the tensions**

The coaches often took a bicultural attitude in order to balance their coaching with their previous workplace experiences and navigate the tensions they felt. Biculturalism is “the pressure to conform to professional standards and dominant culture values and roles in relation to the Black community – a community with its own norms regarding the status of women” (Bell, 1990 p. 460). Biculturalism occurs when Black women respond to social and cultural injustices and are forced to adopt new behaviours in order to gain acceptance from the Anglo community (Guy, 1999). These Black women who now coach other Black women leaders in similar settings are challenged to negotiate both these worlds with skill and ease, and found the transition from one setting to the next to be jarring (Huddleston-Mattai, 1995). Mandisa was adamant that personal experiences with racism have to be kept separate from her experiences as a Black leader:

So as a coach, I found myself having to really focus hard on their experience and helping them see the possibilities for themselves and helping them control the things that they can control, them influence things that they can influence, and I do have to sometimes be pretty mindful of, there are some damaging experiences that I've had as a Black woman that I need to sort of keep those separate from the coaching that I'm doing.

While some can safely alternate between the two cultures in an integrated and harmonious way, others might experience the cultures as conflicting and choose to compartmentalize each culture (Sims & Carter, 2019). Forming a bicultural protection around oneself can lead one to a position of marginality (Bell, 1990). A marginal person is one who lives on the boundaries of two distinct cultures, one being more powerful than the other, but who does not have the ancestry, belief system, or social skills to be fully a member of the dominant cultural group (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937). Mandisa and other coaches' marginality approached what bell hooks (1990) described as a place of

resistance that is continually formed [ . . . ] which give us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (p. 153).

### **Code-switching**

Many of the coaches talked about having to coach clients through code-switching scenarios for them to embrace the dominant culture at work. Isley reflected on the fact that she learned to code-switch at her mother's knee, saying “I mean, it's just something [that's] a shared experience, by the way.” Maxine's story of a coaching client she had during the racial reckoning was a familiar one for Black women coaches.

A client was [ . . . ] trying to figure out should she wear her hair in a natural way because everyone's saying something about it. She's the only Black person in many departments that she talks to. And the only other Black person in leadership always wore a wig with straight hair. So, we had a conversation and as a coach, we don't give them the answer. They come up with the answer. So we talked about the different perspectives on hair. How it may be impacting or maybe not be impacting her moving up. And then what was her choice based on what her thoughts were about if it was impacting or not impacting when it came to her job. She decided that she was going to put her hair in a style that was more conservative. But she didn't want to. It was tiring. I think that conversation was tiring for her but it was one that she really needed to be coached through. That was something she had to think through and she decided her being promoted was more important than her wearing her hair how she wanted to.

Like Maxine, Sage had frequent conversations about code-switching with her clients during this time. However, she noticed a generational shift in her addressing of code-switching within her coaching practice.

Code-switching for example came up because this is a younger person [ . . . ] not Gen Z, a millennial, thirties. And her idea of code-switching was completely different than the idea I studied as a literary studies person and what it means in rhetoric and in the social sciences. For her, it meant pretending to be White. What we would've called Oreo mentality in say the eighties and nineties. And for my discourse community, it means changing how you talk about things and what kinds of vernacular you use depending on your audience, changing how you write for a particular audience. And it was not perceived, it's still isn't for me, as a betrayal of your culture. It was perceived as a way to be adaptable and

flexible given the situation to disarm people of other cultures, depending on the situation, and to go back and forth.

Interestingly, there is literature that suggests that younger generations can view code-switching as cultural disloyalty and an additional layer of harm that occurs when individuals from marginalised ethnic-racial groups are insulted or victimised by in group members (Durkee & Gomez, 2021; Gomez & Gobin, 2020). Making meaning of the shifts that happen in clients (e.g. generationally, culturally) was an important tool for coaches to continue on their own leadership trajectory and learning for future clients.

### **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions, racial hostility, and ambivalence were other forms of tensions that the coaches had to navigate with their clients. Black women attempt to protect themselves from microaggressions and hypervisibility by engaging in identity shifting and avoidance, or they might silence their opinions (Brannon et al., 2015; Davis, 2018; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019). By the summer of 2021 when the interviews took place, the Black women coaches felt isolated, like their clients who were living through the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning. Zoom and virtual meetings exacerbated the feelings of isolation, invalidation, and invisibility/hypervisibility. Mandisa specifically called out Zoom for being a source of aggression:

The weight of [microaggression] is so emotional and so stressful that it's literally every time you go into a space, you go into a conversation, you get on a Zoom. Zoom is awful for this because you have to almost, "Okay, get ready for your performative monologue of 'all is right and just here'," and you know it isn't, but you still have to get on this Zoom where all I can see is just keep your shoulders up, right, and try to recover from what happened last time, keep on track what we need to do this time, right? It's a heavy weight. It's a heavy weight.

There were other microaggressions mentioned as well. At the time of the racial reckoning, coaches felt that Black women were being saddled with racist tropes and felt the weight of being micro aggressed. At the same time, others felt a visceral shift and aversion towards Black women. The ways the

coaches combatted hostility and negativity for themselves and their clients are discussed next.

### **Armouring**

While the challenges concerning race are not new, the women felt they had to lead and coach differently in order to prepare their clients for a new racially charged workplace. The coaches described the need to armour themselves and their clients to face the workplace after the reckoning. Armouring is an adaptive mechanism for coping with racial oppression (Greene, 1994) that refers to a "specific behavioural and cognitive skills used by Black and other people of colour to promote self-caring during direct encounters with racists and/or racist ideologies" (Faulkner, 1983, p. 196).

Armouring became a part of how these Black women helped their clients. Maxine expressed:

One, the challenge of how important it is to be able to help someone navigate the realities of their colour practically impacting their life, but still be able to take them through a place of possibility. I think that's a very delicate balance. And I think it's easiest if you understand that Black people can have it harder at times. So, I can empathise and acknowledge and validate from a very authentic place, but then at the same time be able to take him higher. I think that stood out, because I do want to help them get to a place of possibilities.

Khadijah also felt the need to edify Black women during this time and make the coaching of Black women integral to her practice: "let me just take my little pebble out of that bucket, because they got a big old bucket to pick from, and just drop it over here, and dedicate myself to Black women." Mandisa armoured her clients by allowing them to feel they have choices "in how we deal with individual circumstances. There are choices in terms of how we decide to navigate our careers. So some of those stresses are scary, but very rarely are we without choice." Nicole coached leaders to be confident in who they are:

I think that you're not able to lead well until you're confident in who you are and what you have to offer. If you're continually questioning yourself and you don't feel like you're enough, then it's hard to lead others because they're going to sense that and you're going to manifest that in other ways when you lack that

confidence. So a lot of the work I do initially with clients is a lot of mindset changing before I can actually get to the skillset.

Finally, Khadijah's affirmation of trust among Black clients and coaches was reminiscent of Quasie's (2021) eloquence: "An anti-Black world expects Blackness from Black people; in a Black world, what we expect and get from Black people is beingness" (p. 10).

Oddly enough, I feel like it [was] a very unique experience. We're such complex people. . . I don't even know the words for it, but I know that we trust each other, which I didn't always think. I never saw that until coaching, but we trust each other. Yeah, you grow up and you think that the girl next door, down the street . . . Black women trust each other.

This is in keeping with the idea that Black women coaches are divergent thinking, creative, risk-taking, and boundary spanning (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019) as they helped to build each other up through the racial reckoning. In the end, the participants relied on the hopefulness of coaching, and experienced joy in providing this expansiveness to their clients.

### **Implications and future research**

Already constrained relationships were exacerbated by remote workplace dynamics in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the racial reckoning that followed (Carter et al, in press). Efforts to maintain professionalism and collegiality during this time failed to slow prejudice and bias and actually created additional emotional and cognitive labour (Melaku, 2020) and tension for many Black professionals. While many organisations were at least open to starting conversations around race during the racial reckoning, going further to mandating DEI training and coaching with a DEI focus can signal a commitment to increasing awareness of systemic racial inequities to foster a more welcoming environment. Successful DEI coaching conversations should promote greater recognition of unconscious bias and prejudice and how they manifest in the workplace, as well as offer opportunities for growth in these areas. It is also important that DEI training and coaching are carried out in a thoughtful way to prevent defensiveness and backlash from participants (Okegbe, 2021). Tackling DEI issues at the system level is a much broader and deeper challenge that might be more easily addressed if enterprises start to value closer, open, and trusting relationships at all levels of the organisation (Schein, et. al, 2021). When organisations reactively respond to social media or other forms of external scrutiny with meaningless or ill-thought-out DEI programmes, the tension increases for Black employees and

may cause them to feign engagement at work and can also prevent a sense of belonging and productive action toward racism (Bohonos & James-Gallaway, 2022). In addition, collapsing professional distance by returning to more face-to-face meetings and using virtual conferencing platforms on an as-needed basis may also be helpful in reducing performative and micro-aggressive actions in virtual meetings.

Our research found that during the racial reckoning, these coaches played a critical role in building the competencies of the individuals they coached and the organisations that sponsored them. The Black women coaches were successful in brokering race relations in organisations through conversations about microaggressions and code-switching, and by armouring their own and their client's capacity building and growth. In this way, they also helped their sponsored organisations by fostering the conditions that shift organisational mindsets, policies, and practices toward coaching conversations with a racial equity focus and away from performative wokeness. Future research should seek to center the leadership and coaching experiences of Black women in order to develop the capacity of individuals and organisations alike.

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