



Voices from the Workplace: The Gap Between Minority Experiences and White Perceptions of Racism at Work

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Introduction

Racism in the United States has long been a complex and corrosive phenomenon that permeates every sector of our society, including our workplaces. Following the extrajudicial killings of George Floyd and other Black Americans in 2020, protests for racial equity and justice erupted. CEOs from across leading corporations stepped up with well-meaning statements in support of Black Lives Matter, and renewed commitments to diverse and inclusive workplaces. Many Black employees pushed back, relaying their ongoing and persistent struggles and declaring that their lived experiences with racism in the workplace radically diverged from what executives rushed to articulate as their company values.

It is against this backdrop that MLT sought to understand the lived experiences of people of color at work and the types and degrees of racism they have encountered. MLT surveyed 8,000 MLT alumni—all African American, Latinx, or Native American—who are working at hundreds of top companies across the nation. MLT then compared their lived experiences with racism to the perceptions of white workers. This paper summarizes those findings and includes

ideas about how organizations might invest in organizing, informing and empowering employees to recognize, discuss, and take action to build truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. Further resources and information can be found online at [Voices from the Workplace](#).

Context

Findings from the seminal National Research Council report, [A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society](#), indicate the gulf between white and Black Americans on key indicators like education, housing, and employment, narrowed during the twentieth century, but race-based gaps persisted. (NRC, 1989). Subsequent studies reveal the challenges are deep. (e.g., NRC 2004, Pew 2019, and Citi GPS 2020). The tragic events of 2020—several extrajudicial killings of Black Americans, along with the disproportionate loss of lives and livelihoods to COVID-19—brought renewed attention and energy to solving these long-standing and critical issues.

Among the newly appreciated insights—long true, but not widely appreciated—is the role racism plays in perpetuating persistent and systemic



economic inequality between Blacks and whites. MLT's founder, John Rice, contributed to the dialogue in the summer of 2020 with his article in *The Atlantic*, "The Difference Between First-Degree Racism and Third-Degree Racism." Rice clarified important differences between types of racism— noting that to solve the problem, it must first be clearly recognized and understood (Rice, 2020).

It was in this environment that MLT reached out to its program alumni to gather first-hand accounts and data relating to these distinct types of racism. This paper discusses survey findings, detailing how organizations might both respond and lead in eliminating all forms of racism in the workplace.

Summary of Findings

At the highest level, MLT's survey found that essentially all employees of color (95%) report experiencing at least some form of racism in the workplace, and at a far greater frequency than

white people believe. By comparison, just 64% of white people surveyed believe racism occurred in the workplace. A full 78% of MLT alumni report facing greater scrutiny because of their race.

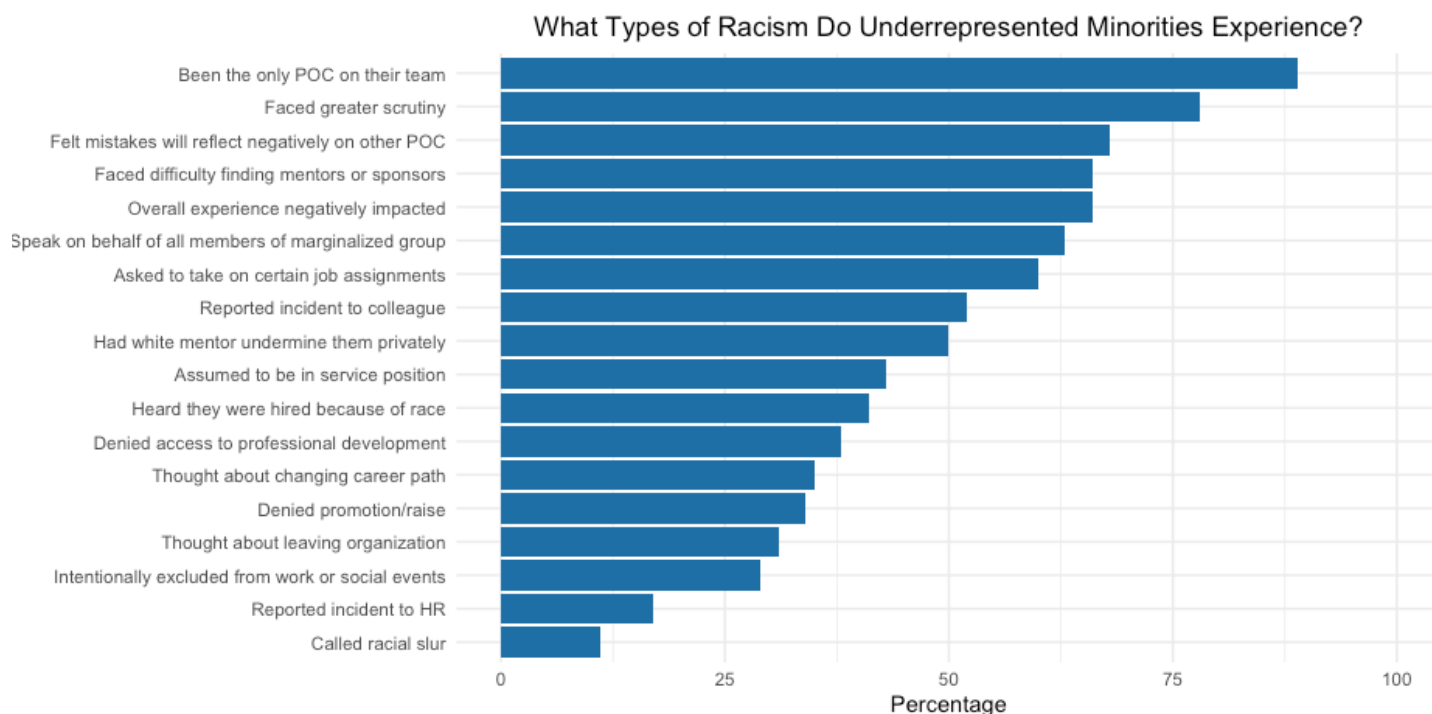
In terms of specific types of racist behavior, the survey found that the types and frequency of racism experienced is broad: nine different behaviors were experienced by at least 50% of respondents. The survey revealed that white people believe racial slurs are one of the most common types of racist behavior, while underrepresented minorities report being called a racial slur far less frequently than they had experienced other types of racism. By contrast, white people consistently underestimated all other forms of racism, indicating a lack of awareness of the lived experiences of people of color.

One out of four white people believe people of color face none of the types of racism presented.

MLT Black Equity at Work: In the fall of 2020, Management Leadership for Tomorrow launched the MLT Black Equity at Work Certification, a first-of-its-kind comprehensive, rigorous, but achievable standard for what "good" looks like with respect to Black equity. The certification centers on five pillars: (1) Black Representation at Every Level, (2) Compensation, (3) Inclusive, Anti-Racist Work Environment, (4) Racially Just Business Practices, and (5) Racial Justice Contributions and Investments. MLT Black Equity at Work Certification is about "calling employers in, not calling employers out." It provides clarity and support that enables any committed

employer, regardless of where they are on the journey toward Black equity, to have confidence they can make meaningful progress and achieve Certification within three years. MLT is creating an ecosystem of ratings agencies, talent platforms, high-profile celebrities, respected organizations, and institutional investors to benefit certified employers with respect to talent recruitment and retention, sales, and access to capital. More than 30 industry-leading employers have committed to taking the steps to become a certified Black equity workplace. Learn more at www.mltblackequityatwork.org.

Experiences of Racism in the Workplace



Methodology: MLT conducted two separate surveys. The first was a survey of MLT alumni, asking whether they had experienced various forms of racism in the workplace. They were asked a series of yes/no questions about different types of racist actions, including whether they had been called a racial slur, been the only person of color on their team, and whether they have ever felt a white mentor/sponsor supported them, but later felt that person may have undermined them. MLT received responses from more than 400 MLT alumni sharing their experiences.

The second survey was fielded in conjunction with the Brunswick Group, and was a part of their weekly workforce tracking study, a national survey of workers with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences including managers, salaried, and hourly workers. White respondents were asked similar questions to the MLT alumni group, but with the perspective of which racist actions their colleagues had experienced in the workplace. This group included more than 700 respondents sharing their perceptions of racism, and provided a comparison to the MLT alumni group.

Is being the only person of color on their team an example of racism?

In MLT's survey, 89% of respondents report having been the only person of color on a team. Being the only person who looks like you on your team can have significant effects on feelings of belonging, quality and quantity of work, and likelihood of advancing in a company. Additionally, the toll of being the

only representative of a marginalized group combined with perceived pressure to fit into the dominant white male corporate culture may make it more difficult for employees to participate in workplace activities. These unique barriers are sometimes, even commonly, unrecognized by white peers and can result in an inequitable experience that feels like racism.

While mentorship and sponsorship are commonly thought to be strong predictors of upward mobility within a company, this is a pain point for underrepresented minorities. The survey found 66% of respondents faced difficulty finding mentors or sponsors, and 50% of respondents had a white mentor support them publicly but privately undermined them. And while being called a racial slur was the least common type of racism reported, 11% of respondents had experienced that in the workplace. Respondents not only show discomfort, but a complete lack of confidence with formal reporting systems. While 52% report sharing details of a racist experience with a colleague, only 17% took their concerns to the human resources department.

The data show that the psychological toll of racism in the workplace is high. Specifically, among respondents, a full 78% of MLT alumni report facing greater scrutiny because of their race, and 68% felt that their mistakes will reflect negatively on other people of color at the company. Sixty-six percent said their experience at their company was negatively impacted due to racism, and 41% had been told they were hired because of their race.

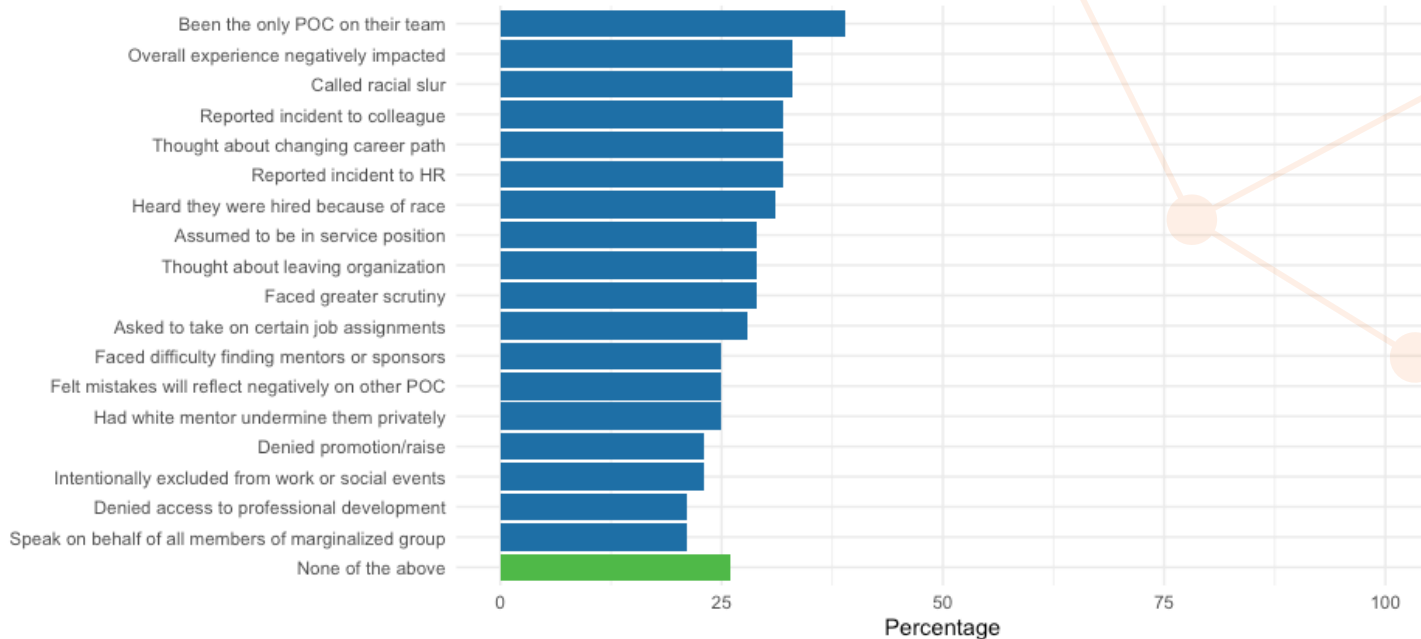
The volume of negative experiences and the lack of confidence in being able to report them to HR take a toll on the mobility and career trajectories of underrepresented minorities. A racist experience is the reason 31% of respondents have thought about leaving their companies and 35% have considered changing career paths.

White Perceptions of Racism in the Workplace

A second survey was fielded by the Brunswick Group as part of their Workplace Outlook tracking survey¹, with a battery of questions added in consultation with MLT. Respondents were asked "Which of the following situations do you feel Black workers have experienced in their job?"; with the list of situations reflecting the same as those MLT asked about in its survey. The goal of this survey was to learn about white perceptions of racism, so only white respondents are included in the sample here. More than 700 people completed the survey, and their responses are tabulated on page five.

¹ Since the beginning of COVID, Brunswick has taken a weekly poll to understand how companies are responding to the pandemic, how they are communicating to their employees, and how employees react to these actions. For more details see <https://www.brunswickgroup.com/>

What Types of Racism Do White People Think Underrepresented Minorities Experience?



The figure above shows the percentage of white people who responded that they feel Black employees have experienced the specific type of racism in their job. An important finding from the survey is that 26% of respondents felt underrepresented minorities had never experienced any of the behaviors listed above. Put differently: more than one out of four respondents believe that these behaviors were not part of the minority experience in the workplace.

Finally, white respondents believe their coworkers of color are equally likely to report racist incidents to a colleague or to HR, both at 32%. White people's lack of awareness about the skepticism many underrepresented minorities have about the ability of official institutions to handle these issues presents another significant barrier to creating an anti-racist workplace. The next section explores the gap between what people of color experience and what white people perceive.

Differences Between Minority Experiences and White Perceptions

The final analysis compares the differences between responses to the MLT survey and the Brunswick survey. As noted above, while 95% of MLT alumni surveyed reported having experienced racism in the workplace, only 64% of white respondents believed that their coworkers of color had such an experience. This 31 percentage point gap between the two groups highlights the lack of awareness among white people with respect to the experiences of people of color in their companies—demonstrating another serious disconnect and misunderstanding of the problem.

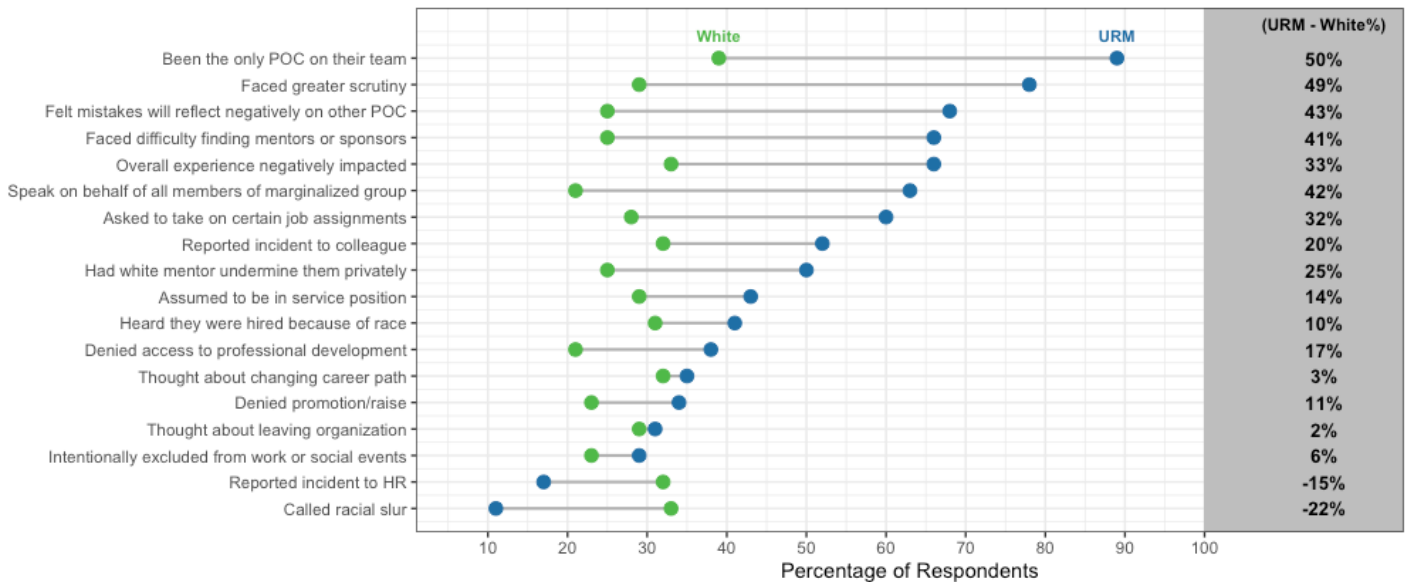
The graph on page six presents results as the difference between responses to the MLT survey and the Brunswick Group survey. Higher positive numbers indicate a greater underestimation of the minority experience as perceived by white respondents. Numbers close to zero indicate an

alignment between the two, and lower negative numbers indicate that white people overestimate the frequency of the behavior.

The chart² reveals a consistent pattern of white people underestimating the amount of racism underrepresented minorities face in the workplace. Even including the two categories in which white people overestimate the frequency, the surveys show a 20.6% gap between how often underrepresented minorities experience these behaviors compared to how often white people perceive them. Of particular note are the five categories with a greater than 40% gap between the two groups: 1) having been the only person of color on a team; 2) facing greater scrutiny

because of your race; 3) feeling your mistakes will reflect negatively on other people of color; 4) facing difficulty finding mentors or sponsors; and 5) being asked to speak on behalf of all members of marginalized groups. These experiences rank among the top of racist encounters reported by Black, Latinx, and Native American respondents, and white unawareness of these issues is notable. These findings demonstrate the effects of white apathy toward the racism underrepresented minorities face in the workplace. White people are able to remain unaware of what is going on and avoid the cognitive dissonance associated with their stated values and the absence of confronting the extent to which racism affects their Black and brown colleagues.

White People Overestimate Prevalence of Racial Slurs But Underestimate Almost Every Other Underrepresented Minority Experience



² The blue dot in the chart indicates the frequency with which underrepresented minorities reported an experience, while the green dot indicates the frequency with which the white survey group reported a belief that Black people had experienced it. The difference is calculated by subtracting the % of white people answering “yes” to the question from the % of underrepresented minorities answering “yes.” So a 50% difference in the first row is calculated by subtracting the white frequency (39%) from the URM frequency (89%) which gives us a 50% gap between the two.

The only two areas where white people overestimate the frequency, compared to the underrepresented minority survey, is in being called a racial slur and reporting incidents to HR. White people associate racism with the most aggressive behaviors, and overestimate confidence in HR.

Taken together, the data show a largely failed understanding of the underrepresented minority experience on multiple levels, and how institutional racism has been widely accepted and inculcated into today's predominately white corporate settings. Even when people of color take the actions they are told will help them succeed in corporate America—getting a degree, getting a good job, working hard—43% of respondents were assumed to be in a service position, and 41% felt or were told they were only hired because of their race. This type of racism is so ingrained as “normal”, white coworkers remain unaware of how often people of color experience it, as well as the toll it takes on their careers and personal well being.

Potential Organizational Responses

The data presented here show a significant lack of awareness among white people about both the type and frequency of racism at all levels of their organization. The misunderstanding that racists are easily identified by their overt behaviors is problematic, but does suggest a useful place to focus energy early is on basic awareness among non-minorities.

As distressing as some of the data above are, almost two-thirds of respondents to MLT's survey (63%) reported that their company has taken

positive steps to create an anti-racist workplace. For companies looking to improve their workplaces and culture, outlined below are pragmatic strategies and action steps that MLT has found effective as part of its Advisory Services practice with partners:

- Build an organization-wide commitment to becoming informed about about Black, Latinx, and Native American employees' experiences, which might include:
 - » Creating opportunities for dialogue and for allowing people who are comfortable doing so to share their stories and experiences in a safe manner— whether in non-recorded online sessions or smaller in-person gatherings;
 - » Encouraging and training leaders and employees to give and receive effective two-way feedback and mentorship (i.e., feedback conversations and mentorship relationships go both “down” and “up”, providing an opportunity for more senior leaders to learn about the experiences of more junior people as well as “near-peer” conversations).
 - » Engaging neutral facilitators to excavate underrepresented employee experiences, and to help leaders understand the causes and solutions (e.g., MLT conducts confidential focus groups and interviews at companies and then presents key themes to executives, which allows individuals to remain anonymous).
- Train leaders and managers to increase their awareness how employees of color are experiencing the workplace. Here is where traditional diversity strategies,

including unconscious bias training, often fall short. These exercises tend to focus on addressing internal assumptions and stereotypes formed by those in the majority and positions of power (often white males). MLT, in contrast, advocates for “Proximity Training” that shifts leaders’ focus outward—encouraging them to deepen their understanding of underrepresented employees’ thoughts, needs, and motivations. In this way, organizations can identify differences in individuals’ experiences and take actions toward a level playing field for everyone. When psychological insights from both majority and minority groups are understood and taken into account, organizations have a much higher chance of developing and executing effective DEI strategies.

- Leverage measurement and evaluation leading practices on tracking, reviewing, and visualizing key data. For example, ensuring employee outcomes (e.g., promotions, performance reviews, hiring, etc.) can be viewed by gender, ethnicity and other diversity dimensions, so as to uncover any demographic divergence.

With 8,000+ alumni and hundreds of corporate and university partners, MLT’s unique position bridging college and career provides access to a myriad of stories from Black, Latinx and Native American workers, detailing their lived experiences with racism. These incidents broadly impact the daily work experience for millions of employees, negatively affecting retention and advancement. With a collective focus on creating more inclusive work environments, there is great potential for positive change to reverberate into the personal interactions and the broader community. In collecting and summarizing the experiences of our alumni, MLT hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of the facts and potential solutions that can be pursued to achieve truly diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplaces.



Appendix: Questionnaire for MLT Alumni

1. Across your overall work experience, have you experienced any of the following? (Yes/No)
 - a. Felt a white mentor/sponsor supported you but you later felt that person may have undermined you
 - b. You told us you believed a white mentor/sponsor supported you but who later may have undermined you. Would you mind sharing 2-3 sentences about this for us to quote anonymously in a blog or insights post on the MLT website?
 - c. Felt you were denied a promotion or a raise based on your race
 - d. Felt you were denied access to professional development or special assignments based on your race
 - e. Felt you faced greater scrutiny or requirements in comparison to white colleagues
 - f. Felt you were asked to take on certain job assignments because of your race (e.g. lead ERG, social event planning, admin tasks)
 - g. Felt you faced difficulty finding mentors or sponsors
 - h. Felt you were intentionally excluded from work or social events because of your race
 - i. Felt that your overall experience was negatively impacted by your race even if there was no explicit evidence
 - j. Felt or heard that you were hired because of your race
 - k. Felt that your mistakes will reflect negatively on other people of color in your firm
 - l. Were assumed to have been in a service position (i.e. assistant, security guard, maintenance, etc.)
 - m. Been asked to speak on behalf of all members of a marginalized race
 - n. Been the only person of color on your team
 - o. Been called a racial slur
2. Have you reported an incident to a colleague in which you perceived that race played the defining role? (Radio buttons: Yes/No)
3. Did racial discrimination, whether a specific incident or an environment, ever prompt you to leave the organization? (Yes/No)
4. Did racial discrimination, whether a specific incident or an environment, ever prompt you to change your career pathway (i.e. leave industry, switch functions, depart a location)? (Yes/No)

References

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