

9 Shifting in Black Women: Clinical Implications

with Kumea Shorter-Gooden *

Black women . . . shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting “White,” then shifting “Black” again, shifting “corporate,” shifting “cool.” . . . shifting has become such an integral part of Black women’s behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath – without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related.

(Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 7)

Adia was around age 12 when she first learned a painful lesson on what happens when a Black woman does not shift her behavior in the way that Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe. Adia was invited to join a choir organized by the White parents of a classmate. She attended a small, predominantly White private school, and almost everyone in the class was in the choir. Adia was the only Black girl and one of two Black children in the choir. She was confident in her singing abilities because she had been part of the youth choir at her Black church since she was around 5 years old. Adia enjoyed singing, and she was excited that this new choir was going to be recording songs. Adia’s confidence quickly dimmed as she was told repeatedly that she was too loud, that her voice was too bold, that it did not blend into the rest of the choir. Adia was confused by this; her choir director at church had affirmed her bold singing voice, and she was never chastised for her voice standing out too much. Adia tried her best to tone it down, to make her voice sound softer, to blend in, but her efforts were not enough. When the choir regrouped for a second season, she was the only person not invited to return to the choir. Adia felt hurt and rejected; she felt like there was something wrong with her and the way she sang. She had not done a good enough job fitting in, assimilating, shifting. She learned that her full voice, her full self, would not always be

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welcome and that if she wanted to be included in predominantly White spaces, she would need to change the way she acted and engaged. This was Adia's introduction to why and how Black women and girls shift.

As Black girls and women navigate racism and sexism, they learn to shift, changing how they act or present themselves at school, work, and in other aspects of their lives. Sometimes the message that Black women and girls must shift comes explicitly from family members warning them against the perils of being too open at school or work. Sometimes Black women learn shifting as Adia did, through the pain of rejection and the implicit communication that being herself was not okay. Shifting is both a strategy that helps Black women to navigate environments where Black women are expected not to take up space and a burden that weighs Black women down and can cause them to feel disconnected from their true selves (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In this chapter, we explore what leads Black women to shift, provide a nuanced understanding of how Black women shift in their lives, and discuss the costs and benefits of shifting. We share strategies for working with Black women clients to identify shifting and its impact, and we offer recommendations for therapists to enhance their effectiveness in working with Black women in a culturally responsive manner.

9.1 What Is Shifting?

Shifting is defined as the myriad ways – affective, cognitive, behavioral – that Black women respond to racial and gender bias (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Jones et al., 2021). It includes a focus on the Black woman's feelings and mood; her confidence, sense of agency, and aspirations; and her behavior (e.g., how she styles her hair, how she performs in job interviews, whether she extricates herself from an abusive relationship, whether she marches for racial justice). At times, shifting is consciously elected and enacted; at other times, shifting occurs unconsciously. The phenomenon of shifting is not unique to Black women but rather is a way of understanding the experiences of all social identity groups that experience societal marginalization (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

9.2 Black Women's Shifting in Context

We have mentioned before that Black women living at the intersection of racism and sexism navigate two marginalized identities – being Black and female – which incurs the double marginalization of gendered racism (Essed, 1991; Reid, 1988). The uniqueness of gendered racism can be overlooked in discussion of the racial oppression or racial animus experienced by “Black people” – often meaning Black men. Much of the discourse spotlights Black

men, who often experience racism in particularly overt, violent, and lethal ways (Crenshaw, 2017). The May 2020 murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer galvanized the nation, as it well should! Yet, the somewhat quieter, more subtle ways in which many Black women experience racism and sexism in multiple contexts are sometimes missed or overlooked. It should be noted that Black women also experience overt, violent, deadly racism, as in the March 2020 killing of Breonna Taylor (Crenshaw, 2017).

Who Black women are, and how they function emotionally in response to gendered and racist contexts, has to do with internal psychological factors, which are largely a function of childhood experiences with primary caregivers and family members (Shorter-Gooden & Jackson, 2000). And yet, these two categories – sociocultural and internal psychological – are not fully distinct; for example, caregivers' capacity, competence, strengths, and challenges are influenced by their own experiences of bias and discrimination, including, in many cases, socioeconomic disadvantage and exposure to stress. Psychological theories have typically done little to incorporate these two categories and make sense of the impact of the sociocultural context on Black people (Greene, 1997). Meanwhile, Afrocentric approaches have tended to focus on static, group-level characteristics purported to be applicable to all Black people, but these approaches pay little attention to how cultural factors intersect with a person's individual psychology (Braun, 1999). As a result, therapists who aspire to treat Black women in a culturally responsive manner are often on their own in discerning how to integrate personal-emotional and sociocultural factors appropriately and effectively. The concept of shifting provides a lens that brings together these two categories. Therapists should understand why and how Black women shift to manage racist or sexist situations or other marginalization (Jones et al., 2021). This understanding can lead to assessment and therapeutic interventions to help Black women clients live authentic lives, finding other strategies to manage the pain and suffering of marginalizing experiences.

9.3 Why Black Women Shift

Black women engage in shifting to help them navigate the racism and sexism they experience in spaces and places where White people and men are centered. Black women report experiencing high levels of stress in their workplaces and using the strategy of shifting to navigate the stereotyping and discrimination they experience in their professional lives (Dickens et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) may engage in shifting such as changing their tone or pitch of their voice and their general way of expressing themselves to protect themselves as they navigate

the world (Holden, 2019). Black women also report shifting in their home communities, with family, and in romantic relationships (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women who identify as LGBTQ may shift in response to homophobia and transphobia they experience within the Black community, which has historically not been welcoming of people who identify as sexual minorities. As with women from other racial groups, the demands, at home and in public, for Black women's time and attention and to present themselves in narrowly defined ways can be high, and Black women often shift to make their loved ones and colleagues feel comfortable. In summary, many Black women employ mental strategies to hold their heads high as they learn, work, love, and interact in a world that diminishes them and their accomplishments. They use an array of shifting strategies to avoid being marginalized and diminished and to find ways to thrive.

To provide a clearer picture of how shifting manifests, we discuss four core themes in Black women's shifting that emerged from the African American Women's Voices Project, a qualitative study of 333 Black women, exploring their experiences and perceptions of the impact of racism and sexism in their lives (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The four themes are inferiority, image, invisibility, and invincibility. These themes will serve as helpful guides to therapists who are seeking to identify and understand shifting practices and patterns.

9.3.1 *Inferiority*

Black women live in the shadow of the myth of inferiority. Many Black women talk about the impact of the long-standing stereotype that they are not intelligent or competent. For example, Black professional women talk of how weary they are, after delivering an excellent speech or otherwise demonstrating their intellectual prowess, of seeing a look of amazement and hearing "You're so articulate!" or even "You don't seem Black." These backhanded compliments clearly convey that "Blackness" and "competence" are seen as mutually exclusive.

Particularly in settings where they are in the minority or where few Black people are present, Black women are frequently hypervigilant, often scanning and scrutinizing the environment, keenly attuned to how they are being perceived and whether they are outpacing the myth of inferiority. A 26-year-old single mother and college student at a predominantly White university reported:

I was the only one from my family to go to college. I had to adapt to Whites' expectations of me. I felt I had to change my external appearance – the way I talk, the way I walk, the way I carried myself, the way I wore my hair. I had to create all of this hype in order to be perceived as an intelligent Black woman. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 68)

Like many other Black women, she may not have come to *believe* that she was inferior, but she appeared to utilize significant emotional resources to counter the notion in the eyes of others – to prove them wrong.

We encourage therapists to be aware of how their Black female clients may be working to combat the stereotype that they are inferior in the therapeutic relationship itself by intellectualizing their issues or using language that is not how they typically speak. As discussed in Chapter 4, it is important for therapists to examine their beliefs about Black women and ensure that they are not holding negative assumptions or stereotypes about Black women. For example, if a therapist assumes that Black women typically do not attend graduate school, they may express surprise when a client shares that she has earned a graduate degree and reinforce the client's feelings that she must shift in therapy to disprove the myth that Black women are inferior.

9.3.2 *Image*

The intersection of racial and gender bias is particularly evident in the arena of beauty. We live in a society with a strong demand for women to be beautiful and where beauty continues to be defined as “White, thin, and blonde” (Cotter et al., 2015; West, 1995). As a result, many Black women wrestle with feeling good about how they look. Some speak of being ashamed of the darkness of their skin, the kinkiness and short length of their hair, the breadth of their noses, the fullness of their behinds. One woman said: “It's taken me 41 years to get to accepting the package I'm in – to be okay with my skin tone, my weight, my hair, with just me. For a long time, I walked in a lot of shame; I walked in a lot of low self-esteem” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 176). Although the Black Power movement of the late 1960s, with its slogan “Black is beautiful,” helped to transform the beauty aesthetic of many Black women from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric ideal, and thus to facilitate a shift from feeling unattractive to feeling beautiful (Cotter et al., 2015; Russell et al., 1992), contemporary experiences convey that the transformation is not yet complete.

Related to image, hair is a powerful symbol of Black women's beauty and self-expression. Hair has also been the source of discrimination for Black women, with Black girls being banned from school for their locs or Afros and Black women being barred from wearing braids or twists in the military (Griffin, 2019). Black women's hair has become a primary way that White society has communicated that Black women's appearance is not acceptable. Because of this, many Black women shift through the way they wear their hair. Most Black women's hair is naturally kinky and curly, and many women spend hours in beauty salons straightening their hair through chemicals or intense heat. It is a ritual of sorts for Black women, who range from genuinely

preferring their hair straight to feeling obligated, consciously or unconsciously, to straighten their hair to experience professional success. Adia can clearly remember the last time she straightened her hair for an interview and the nervousness she felt when she wore her natural hair without straightening or adding extensions for the next professional interview she had. This choice not to shift her appearance felt bold and vulnerable.

The challenges that Black women experience related to their physical appearance and the judgment they experience based on their appearance are explored further in Chapter 12 on lookism, also known as appearance bias.

We encourage therapists to pay attention to how their Black female clients show up to therapy in terms of their physical appearance. For example, Black women may feel pressure to have their hair, nails, makeup, and clothing just right even when they are going to a therapy session. This may represent a deliberate strategy to increase the likelihood that they will be taken seriously and receive excellent care. However, therapists need to be attuned to this possibility and the problem of the client needing to “perform” for the therapist. Therapists should support their Black female clients in exploring the pressures they feel to shift their appearance in and outside of the therapy room.

9.3.3 *Invisibility*

Many Black women feel invisible – unseen, discounted, dismissed, especially in situations where they are one of a few Black people or women. Professional women report that they are often unrecognized by White people as fellow professionals and instead are routinely assumed to be support staff or wait staff. Others report that at work their comments and ideas are not taken seriously. Some women describe being “ghettoized” at work, for example, being given only the accounts of Black clients or being consulted or listened to only with regard to Black issues or concerns. As a prominent C-suite leader at a university and the only Black woman among a high-level cabinet, one of the coauthors of this chapter had the experience at her first meeting of being instructed to sit at the far end of a very long rectangular conference table, along with lower-ranked cabinet members. At first, thinking this was a joke, she ignored the instruction and chose a seat. Later she was pulled aside and told that this was no joke. This overt marginalization may not have been based primarily on race or gender, but not surprisingly the one other Black person on the cabinet was also at the far end, requiring more effort to get the attention of the presiding officer and join the conversation. And it was not clear that a White man or woman would have been instructed so vigorously about where to sit. In contrast, when diversity-related crises occurred on campus, this coauthor’s experience of invisibility morphed into hypervisibility, and the message from leadership was that she was critical to fixing things.

Some Black women experience themselves as shrinking, in effect, colluding with the external message of invisibility. Marva, a 23-year-old college student, said:

One of my biggest adjustments is that when I'm around other Black people, I think I'm the most outgoing, most outspoken. But at school, I don't feel as free to just voice my opinions. I feel like I have to think about what I'm going to say before I just say it. I seem so much more reserved, painfully shy. This semester I have a chemistry lab and I'm the only Black person there. I almost feel my voice just shrink. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 115)

And yet, the irony is that many Black women, especially those in the minority at school or at work, often experience a heightened sense of visibility. They feel they are in the spotlight, their every move observed and judged. A compelling body of research has documented the increased visibility, scrutiny, and demands placed on "tokens" in the workplace – those who are in the numerical minority with respect to race or gender (Reskin et al., 1999). Ironically, the sense of invisibility and the heightened sense of visibility often seem to coexist. Black women may feel torn between wanting to stand out and be seen as an individual and wanting to shift in order to fly under the radar and avoid additional scrutiny. We suggest therapists explore the times when their Black female clients feel invisible or hypervisible and how this experience impacts them.

9.3.4 *Invincibility*

Many Black women have internalized the notion that they must always be strong: that they are invulnerable, that they never need help, that they can and must do it all. The myth of invincibility is seductive, as it is far more attractive than being seen as unintelligent or unattractive. Yet, the myth of always being strong is a potential trap, especially if it makes a woman feel that she must be superhuman and that she does not deserve love and care from others. The underside of the sense of invincibility is the feeling that one is undeserving or unworthy. One woman, in her late 30s, said:

The superwoman stereotype – we've embodied that. And we think we have to be all things to everybody. And we go about doing that, but we are nothing to ourselves. We are nurturing; we're taking care of our kids. We're taking care of our brother, our sister, our parents, our man, but not taking care of ourselves. I think that just about every Black woman I know is doing that. . . . I really feel guilty if I do something for myself. I think that a lot of us have been beat down by life, that even though outwardly, we may be the most sophisticated, the most together sister there is, we're not sure we're worth the self-nurturing. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, pp. 20–21)

Black women who subscribe to the myth of invincibility have difficulty acknowledging their pain or distress and thus have difficulty in seeking therapeutic help (Romero, 2000). Moreover, even when these women seek therapy, they may have difficulty in engaging, disclosing, and acknowledging their vulnerability. However, a sense of invincibility can, in moderation and when unaccompanied by a feeling of undeservedness, be a valuable resource for the client as she tackles obstacles in her life. While affirming Black women's resilience, we caution therapists not to use language such as "you are strong" with Black women, which may invalidate the pain they experience and inadvertently reinforce the Strong Black Woman persona.

The pressure Black women feel to be invincible is discussed further in Chapter 8, on the Strong Black Woman phenomenon.

9.4 Benefits of Shifting

Shifting has helped Black women adapt to the demands of different environments and succeed academically and professionally (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Jones et al., 2021). Shifting enables Black women to sense what is expected of them in various spaces and meet these expectations. In a qualitative study, early-career Black women identified that shifting enabled them to develop relationships with colleagues that would benefit them in their careers (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). The ability to change their use of language, tone of voice, and overall presentation allowed these Black women to connect with coworkers and supported them in moving forward in their careers. In other words, shifting helps Black women to live and work effectively across differences – to function biculturally. Shifting can even enable Black women to bring an often needed "outsider" perspective into an organization, bringing fresh eyes and new perspectives (Gamst et al., 2020; Shorter-Gooden, 2012).

Shifting helps Black women to effectively navigate challenging environments where racial and gender bias are prevalent. Johnson et al. (2016) found that Black women who demonstrate higher levels of acculturation to African American culture also report anticipating bias and engaging in shifting behaviors to protect themselves from this bias. Black women have also reported that shifting is one strategy they used to combat negative stereotypes about Black women and to represent the Black community in a positive way (Dickens & Chavez, 2018), which many Black people are forced to do when they are the only Black person or one of few Black people in a work or educational environment.

In predominantly White environments, Black people often feel compelled to shift in order to maintain White people's comfort because when White people feel comfortable, Black people are usually safer around them (Menakem, 2017). Many Black people have had the experience of being blamed or attacked when White people are uncomfortable with their presence or behavior (DiAngelo, 2018). Extreme examples of this are the harsh punishment that Black children receive in schools and police shootings of unarmed Black people. More subtle examples involve being passed over for a promotion, ignored in a board meeting, and unfairly accused of being aggressive or angry. Thus, shifting can help Black women protect themselves and buffer White racism; it can help Black women to survive and to succeed. Yet this raises the question – at what cost?

9.5 Costs of Shifting

While shifting is one way that Black women cope with the gendered racism they experience and can help them in navigating school, career, and relationships, it comes with mental and emotional costs. In a qualitative study, Black women shared that losing their voices and ability to advocate for themselves and others was one cost of shifting (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Specifically, Black female participants shared that shifting made them feel that they were being inauthentic at work and that they needed to assimilate to the White culture in their workplaces (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Overall, Dickens and Chavez found that their participants reported experiencing significant psychological stress from shifting across various work and personal settings. This stress can show up as feelings of exhaustion, irritability, and burnout. In another qualitative study of Black women's experience in the workplace, participants expressed that shifting took a toll on them mentally and emotionally (Hall et al., 2012).

Shifting in the context of romantic relationships can also be problematic. As discussed in Chapter 11, romantic relationships between Black women and Black men can be challenging for a number of reasons. Black women may feel compelled to shift in their relationships with Black men and downplay their assertiveness and achievements to avoid outshining their Black male partners. In the African American Women's Voices Project, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) found that 40% of the survey participants acknowledged hiding their strengths and accomplishments in relationships with Black men. Due to systemic racism and the gendered racism that Black men experience, many of their paths to success have been blocked, making it difficult for them to achieve in mainstream American society (Franklin, 1998). African Americans' relationships are known to be more egalitarian than those of their White peers (Marks et al., 2008). However, it is not uncommon for patriarchal gender

norms to influence the relationship, and Black women's academic and financial success can sometimes be a threat to harmonious relationships with Black male partners. Black women who shift in their relationships may experience cumulative exhaustion over the course of the relationship and may even be in danger of staying in harmful or abusive relationships. We encourage therapists to support Black women in exploring the ways they may be shifting in their romantic relationships and help them identify ways to create space in their relationships to be their full selves.

Overall, shifting can limit the times and spaces in which Black women feel that they can be their authentic selves, and over time Black women may lose touch with their true selves as they contend with both demanding and limiting expectations at work, at home, and in their communities. Not being grounded in their sense of self and purpose can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. Additionally, as Black women shift to accommodate the people in their lives, it can be easy for them to internalize the belief that who they are is not okay.

9.6 Recommendations for Therapists

Shifting is a normative, complex process that most Black women engage in, which impacts their well-being. Given that shifting is such a common experience and has significant costs for Black women, it is important to integrate discussions of shifting into therapy. We encourage therapists to be attuned to, assess, and be aware of shifting that may occur inside and outside the therapy room, and to support awareness of shifting and the development of healthy shifting strategies for their Black female clients. An important aspect of the therapeutic work related to shifting is focused on supporting Black women in loving and accepting themselves as they are and reducing the amount of emotional energy they spend shifting to make other people feel comfortable. Here, we provide five recommendations for therapists to take a strengths-based approach to supporting Black women in navigating shifting: (a) discuss issues of racial and gender bias, (b) assess shifting, (c) support Black women in cultivating authenticity, (d) help Black women manage the stress of shifting, and (e) explore and address how shifting shows up in the therapy room.

9.6.1 *Discuss Race and Gender Bias*

Therapists can begin the process by bringing issues of racial, gender, and other relevant biases into the room. During the assessment phase of treatment, therapists should ask Black female clients about how they identify with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender. Additionally, it is helpful for therapists to guide clients in

exploring and processing their experiences related to racism, sexism, and gendered racism and normalize the stress that results from experiencing discrimination.

Black female clients may not feel comfortable talking about race with non-Black therapists, and it is especially important for non-Black therapists to communicate their willingness to talk about race-related stress and discrimination by asking about whether these experiences are salient for their Black female clients. Many Black people have had the experience of sharing stories of race-based discrimination with White friends or colleagues and having their experiences invalidated by questions about whether they did something to provoke the poor treatment or suggestions of other explanations for the discrimination they experienced. We encourage therapists to accept their Black female clients' experiences at face value and trust their perceptions of what happened. In addition to overt discrimination, the more subtle slights and microaggressions that Black women experience often leave them questioning whether they are being treated poorly due to their race and gender. Black women often wrestle with questions: Is this bias? Maybe he's just having a bad day? Am I overreacting? Evidence shows that the ambiguity of subtle or implicit bias is emotionally taxing and negatively impacts mental health (Nadal et al., 2014). We encourage therapists to listen for what might not be stated explicitly and to prompt exploration of difficult experiences by asking Black female clients if they believe that they were treated in a particular way because of their race, gender, or other intersecting marginalized identities, like being queer or Muslim. And we encourage therapists to create space for their clients' uncertainty and unsureness about these experiences.

9.6.2 *Assess Shifting*

Our second recommendation is for therapists to guide Black women through a shifting assessment to help the client identify ways that they are shifting in their lives. See Table 9.1 for an assessment that can be used in session with clients. As therapists conduct this assessment, they can ask about some items on the list directly and should listen for others. We encourage therapists to keep in mind the four themes of gendered racism (inferiority, image, invisibility, and invincibility) as a useful lens for exploring the ways that Black women shift in their lives. Begin this assessment by asking Black female clients about their experiences at school, at work, and in their family and community. Continue the assessment by exploring how and when Black women feel they need to change their behavior, language, and mannerisms and the impact this has on their internal experiences – their feelings and thoughts. Clients' answers to the shifting assessment questions will help the therapist begin to understand their experiences in various spaces in their lives and how they shift as they navigate these environments.

Table 9.1 *Shifting assessment***Clinical Assessment of Shifting*****Opening Questions***

- How do any other marginalized identities – based on socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender expression, nationality, immigration status, religion/spirituality, disability, age – intersect with being Black and being a woman and impact your experiences?
- Are there ways that you change your communication style or mannerisms when you are at work, at school, with friends, with a partner, at home? In what ways?
- Are there ways that you downplay your strengths and accomplishments to make your partner feel comfortable?
- What makes you feel more or less comfortable fully expressing yourself in your romantic relationship?

Costs and Benefits of Shifting

Preface these questions with an explanation of what shifting is: Shifting occurs in response to stereotypes and biases. It involves changes in your sense of agency and empowerment and can manifest as different communication styles, mannerisms, appearance, ways of being, and interacting, as well as differences in how you think and feel about yourself. Shifting can be helpful in some ways but harmful in others.

- How has shifting helped you to navigate experiences at work? In school? and in relationships?
- In what ways have you benefited from being able to shift in various aspects of your life?
- How has shifting taken a toll on you? Mentally? Emotionally? Physically?

If Black female clients indicate that they shift in their romantic relationships, we encourage therapists to further explore these dynamics with a sensitivity to the unique pressure and anxiety Black women feel related to finding and maintaining romantic relationships. As mentioned earlier, Black women may shift in their relationships, hiding parts of themselves and downplaying their strengths (Gamst et al., 2020; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Exploring the ways that Black women shift in their relationships may bring up truths about the relationship that are difficult for Black women to face, and therapists are encouraged to be gentle with their probing.

Once therapists have supported Black women in identifying how they shift in their lives, the next step in the shifting assessment is to guide their clients in identifying the ways that shifting is helpful to them as well as how shifting can be a burden in their lives. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Black women report benefits of shifting, which can help them to be successful in academic and professional spheres. We also encourage therapists to support their Black female clients in exploring the emotional toll that shifting has on their lives, as certain types of shifting likely contribute to the exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and clinical symptoms that Black women report. Acknowledging the

problematic impact of shifting and supporting Black women in considering the spaces and places in their lives that offer rest and restoration can be a powerful intervention.

A shifting assessment will help Black female clients to name the shifting they do in their lives and acknowledge how it affects their lives. Shifting can be automatic and unconscious, and many Black women may not be aware of the shifts they make as they navigate different environments. Helping Black women to identify the ways that they shift in their lives can increase their awareness and set the stage for them to make intentional choices about whether, when, and how they want to shift in their lives moving forward. During this exploration process, therapists should name and normalize the shifting as a necessary and, at times, adaptive response to racism and sexism. Using the term *shifting* can be helpful in providing a name for the client's experiences.

9.6.3 *Support Black Women in Cultivating Authenticity*

Our third recommendation is for therapists to help their Black female clients cultivate authentic ways of being in multiple spaces. In a qualitative study, Dickens and Chavez (2018) found that Black women who engage in shifting end up feeling inauthentic. When Black women shift in several areas of their lives, they may become disconnected from their authentic selves. Therapy provides an opportunity to help Black women cultivate their authenticity.

At its core, authenticity is about being honest and true to ourselves, including what we believe in and who we are. When we are authentic, we are guided by our internal values, by what is meaningful to us, and by what feels right to us, rather than by external expectations and demands (Thacker, 2016). Authenticity is important for each of us, but it can be harder to achieve when we are bombarded by negative stereotypes and constricting messages.

To begin the process of helping Black women cultivate authenticity, we recommend guiding Black female clients to reflect on times when they feel most at home, relaxed, and comfortable with themselves. Therapists should then guide clients to share how they communicate and behave during these times and discuss what helps them feel comfortable in the spaces where they are being true to themselves. Identifying how Black women show up and engage with others when they feel most comfortable will serve as an indicator of what it looks like for them to be their most authentic selves.

Another helpful exercise to support Black women in connecting to their authenticity is by exploring values through an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) framework. Within ACT, values are seen as guides for ongoing action and behavior; values reflect who you want to be in the world and the legacy that you want to leave. ACT posits that our values guide us to

live rich and meaningful lives and serve as a counterpoint to being guided by fear or anxiety (Grumet & Fitzpatrick, 2016; McCracken & Keogh, 2009). We encourage therapists to engage their Black female clients in values-oriented conversations with these guiding questions: What do you want to be remembered for in your life? What do you want your life to be about? When do you feel most alive and present in your life and what are you doing in those moments? What is most important to you in your life? These questions are intended to help clients connect to who they want to be without focusing on the demands of the other people in their lives.

Once Black female clients have articulated what it looks and feels like for them to be authentic, we recommend that therapists encourage their clients to identify ways that they can bring their full selves into various aspects of their lives. Explore what it would look like for the client to live out her values and be true to herself at work, at school, and in relationships. How would her behavior in these places and relationships be different? In what ways does she want to choose to continue to shift and how would she like to let go of shifting in these environments? As part of this exploration, the client may need to process fears related to expressing her authentic self in professional spaces and talk through ways to determine if it will be safe to bring her full self to various environments. Guiding Black women to identify the real risks of being authentic in predominantly White professional environments is an important part of this process. Further, related to relationships, therapists should understand that discussing the ways a Black female client might be more authentic in her romantic relationships could lead her to consider ending relationships. These conversations can be difficult and painful, and therapists must be careful not to encourage their Black female clients to stay or leave relationships, jobs, or academic programs. The aim of this work is for therapists to empower Black women in making informed and conscious choices about how they want to show up and engage in various parts of their lives.

9.6.4 Stress Management for Shifting

As mentioned, gendered racism and shifting can take a physical and emotional toll on Black women and cause them to experience stress. Our fifth recommendation is for therapists to support Black women in actively managing the stress related to shifting. The shifting assessment guides Black women to identify the mental and emotional toll that shifting can take on them, which is an important first step toward working to mitigate stress caused by shifting. Specifically related to managing stress connected to shifting, we suggest encouraging Black women to spend time with people with whom they can be their full and authentic selves. Additionally, it can be helpful for Black women to have restorative time alone when they feel grounded in themselves

and not pulled to meet anyone's expectations. We encourage therapists to explore with their clients whether engaging in artistic or creative pursuits like singing, dancing, or painting, alone or with other people in accepting spaces, are activities that would help them feel free to express themselves and also relieve stress.

General stress management and coping strategies are discussed further in the chapters on Black women's health (Chapter 13) and resources for Black women thriving (Chapter 14).

9.6.5 *Explore and Address How Shifting Shows Up in the Therapy Room*

Our sixth and final recommendation relates to how shifting might show up in the therapy room for Black female clients. As mentioned, Black female clients may feel compelled to shift to overcompensate and appear competent to their therapists. With White therapists in particular, Black female clients may shift in order to make their therapist feel comfortable. We encourage therapists to explore with Black female clients how they may be shifting with the therapist. During this exploration, it is important for therapists to be open and accepting of what their clients share. Therapists may feel guilt and want to defend themselves in response to hearing that their clients do not feel completely comfortable with them, and it is important for therapists to manage their emotional reactions to any feedback Black female clients provide. Therapists should be curious about their Black female client's experience in therapy and explore what keeps them from being their full selves in therapy and how the therapist can increase the comfort and safety in the therapeutic relationship.

Building a strong therapeutic relationship with Black female clients is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Therapists can guide their Black female clients to identify the parts of themselves they are bringing into therapy and the parts of themselves they are leaving outside of the therapy room. We encourage therapists to discuss what it would look like for clients to bring all parts of themselves into therapy and how it would feel to be vulnerable with the therapist in this way. Focusing on the therapeutic relationship and facilitating an interpersonal process discussion

about shifting in therapy can be a powerful intervention for Black female clients. We recommend that therapists utilize the therapeutic space and relationship as an opportunity for the client to practice being their authentic selves. This approach will also enable therapists to further support their Black female clients as they bring their authentic selves to other aspects of their lives.

Case Example

Latrice is a 25-year-old, heterosexual, cisgender Black woman. Latrice grew up on the west side of Chicago, which is a predominantly Black and economically disadvantaged area. Latrice excelled academically and got into a magnet high school located close to downtown Chicago; she commuted to school by bus while many of her friends in the neighborhood attended the local high school. Latrice was the first in her family to attend college, and while she stayed in Illinois for school, she lived on campus and only saw her family a few times a semester. When she was in college, she had a hard time finding a community and fitting in, and she began feeling somewhat separate from her family and her community when she returned home for visits.

After college and back in Chicago, Latrice, who had always been an athlete, decided to pursue a career in personal training and wellness coaching. Latrice continued to feel like an outsider in the upscale gym where she works as a personal trainer and wellness consultant. She is one of the few women offering personal training and the only Black woman working at the gym who is not part of the maintenance staff. Latrice feels pressure to look the part and makes sure to wear expensive workout gear and always have her hair and nails done. Latrice feels like she has to be “on” when she is at work and interacting with her clients as well as her colleagues. She notices that clients and coworkers seem to question her competence and are surprised when she does things well. Latrice feels demeaned when her coworkers and clients call her “girl” in an attempt to sound cool and connected to Black culture. Latrice feels that she is constantly navigating microaggressions, and she finds herself stressed and exhausted at the end of her workdays.

Latrice longs for the comfort of home and community connection, but when she visits home and spends time with her family she feels like she cannot be completely herself there either. Her cousins tease her about talking “White” and forgetting where she came from. Latrice feels caught between two worlds; at work people assume she is uneducated, and at home people think she considers herself too good for them because she has a college degree and a job in a wealthy neighborhood.

Latrice came to therapy because she was not sure how to handle the microaggressions and stress she was experiencing and noticed that she had been feeling anxious. In the initial sessions, the therapist, a Black woman, worked to build a strong

therapeutic relationship with Latrice and did a thorough assessment to understand Latrice's experience of stress. The therapist helped Latrice to name the pattern of shifting that she was using to cope with the racism, sexism, classism, and micro-aggressions she was experiencing. This approach helped to normalize the stress and exhaustion Latrice experienced as a result of being the only Black woman working in a professional capacity at her gym and no longer feeling like she fits in at home. The therapist guided Latrice to explore the ways that she shifts when she is at work and the emotional energy this takes. Latrice was able to identify the benefits that she experiences when she shifts at work as well as the toll this takes on her and how this makes it more difficult for her to be her authentic self.

Together, Latrice and the therapist also explored whether Latrice felt the need to shift in the therapy room. Latrice acknowledged that she has always wanted to make people like her. Latrice expressed that she looks up to the therapist, sees her as having it all together, and has a hard time talking with her about the ways in which she is struggling. Latrice noted that what she assumed are the class differences in their backgrounds make her feel like it is important for her to speak "proper English." The therapist acknowledged the class differences in their backgrounds and normalized the pressure Latrice felt to disprove the myth of inferiority with the therapist due to their class differences. The therapist offered empathy related to how challenging it is to be vulnerable in therapy and expressed hope that therapy would be a space where Latrice could be her full self. The therapist asked if she could do anything to help Latrice feel more comfortable in the space; Latrice said she did not know, and the therapist encouraged her to tell her if she thought of something in the future. The therapist also briefly disclosed some of her own past struggles and challenges that were relevant to Latrice's experiences, to help her know that she was not alone in struggling.

To help increase the amount of time Latrice spends being her authentic self, the therapist explored with her when she feels most like herself and what helps her to feel most comfortable in these moments. Latrice shared that she feels most authentic with a few of her close girlfriends from college who are also Black and come from similar low-income backgrounds. The therapist guided Latrice to share what she is like when she is with these friends. Latrice and the therapist then discussed what it could look like for Latrice to bring more of herself into the therapy room as a way to practice being her authentic self in more places. Eventually, they expanded this discussion to identify ways for Latrice to bring more of herself into work and at home with her family. They acknowledged that sometimes Latrice still feels it is necessary to shift, particularly at work or in environments that have a history of gendered racism. The therapist used the values-oriented questions from ACT to help Latrice identify ways that she could engage her values at work even when she feels it is still necessary to shift. Latrice found this conversation helpful because pursuing a career in fitness was aligned with her passion and her desire to help people live healthy lives, and revisiting what she most valued about work helped her to feel more empowered

in a challenging environment. Finally, the therapist guided Latrice to identify self-care practices to help her relieve her stress and manage her anxiety on days when shifting felt necessary. She also encouraged Latrice to spend more time with her college friends whom she feels most comfortable with.

This case example highlights the balance we encourage therapists to strike between helping Black female clients to reduce the amount of time they spend shifting while also acknowledging when and where shifting is adaptive in their lives. Normalizing and validating Latrice's experience without rushing to fix or change her behavior was important. Therapists must remember that there are no easy solutions to shifting and that the goal is to support Black female clients to be aware of how and when they shift in their lives and make conscious choices about when they choose to shift and when they can be their authentic selves.

9.7 Therapist Self-Awareness and Authenticity

To work effectively with Black female clients, therapists must develop their awareness, knowledge and skills. In particular, therapists should explore and examine their own identities and privileges, acknowledge their own assumptions and biases, and have strategies to mitigate their impact. This means that White therapists need to wrestle with Whiteness and White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018), particularly the often invisible (to them) ways that Whiteness shows up and impacts the therapeutic relationship. It means that male therapists need to wrestle with sexism and the often subtle ways in which sexism can marginalize women, and how this can be exacerbated with women of color. But this work of self-examination is not limited to White and male therapists. Black women therapists need to be attuned to how they might inadvertently privilege particular shifting strategies that they themselves have adopted or used, and how they might have difficulty creating space for alternative ways in which Black female clients can be authentic and thrive.

Therapist self-examination is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Therapists can do their own "shifting assessment" as part of the self-examination process. In addition to answering questions from the shifting assessment for clients (Table 9.1), we encourage therapists to consider the reflection questions at the end of this chapter. To support clients in cultivating authenticity, it is important for therapists themselves to be on a path toward authenticity.

9.8 Conclusion

Shifting is an important framework for understanding the behaviors and experiences of Black women. Shifting is a complex and at times adaptive response to the gendered racism that Black women navigate on a daily basis. However, shifting can also take an emotional toll on Black women, and therapy provides an opportunity for Black women to explore and examine their shifting and make empowered choices about how and when to engage in shifting and to cultivate their authenticity. An important caveat: When addressing shifting as a psychological coping mechanism, with positive but mostly negative impacts on mental health, the therapist needs to fully grasp why Black women shift in the first place. Indeed, even in the therapy environment Black women can display shifting dynamics, which may be subtle yet visible to the discerning therapist. Asking a Black female client about shifting dynamics requires therapists to be culturally self-aware and attuned to the therapy environment as one in which Black women can feel racial and cultural discomfort. When Black female clients collaborate with a therapist to name and explore shifting dynamics, this is a powerful signal of trust and confidence that can pave the way for corrective emotional experiences. In any scenario, Black women's mental health is protected by their confidence to show up as their authentic selves, without having to code-switch or shift to avoid being stereotyped or marginalized.

Therapist Reflection Questions

1. What are your privileged and marginalized identities?
2. How do you deal with your marginalized identities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics? What are your shifting strategies?
3. How might your approach impact your capacity to discuss these issues with clients and your sense of *how* one should shift? To what extent have you explored these issues?
4. What additional work do you need to do to become more aware of your own standpoint and the lens through which you work with Black female clients?
5. What are your biggest takeaways from this chapter that might impact your conversations with Black female clients?
6. What experiences have your Black female clients discussed with you that makes you wonder if they shift to manage dynamics in some settings?

Resources

Books

- Anderson, C. (2021). *Intelligence isn't enough: A black professionals guide to thriving in the workplace*. Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Jones, C., & Gooden, K. S. (2003). *Shifting: The double lives of black women in America*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Tatum, B.D. (2017). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: And other conversations about race* (2nd ed.). Basic Books.

Podcasts

- Hodson, T. (Executive Producer). (2020, July 28). Code-switching is a form of systemic racism against blacks [Audio podcast episode]. In *Spectrum*. Woub Public Media. <https://woub.org/2020/07/28/code-switching-is-a-form-of-systemic-racism-against-blacks/>
- Pharm, J. (Host). (2020–present). Blackness and the workplace [Audio podcast]. <https://www.blacknessandtheworkplace.com/podcast>

Films

- Melfi, T. (Director). (2016). *Hidden figures* [Film]. Fox 2000 Pictures.

Media Resources

- Netflix. (2018, May 18). *What had happened was. Episode 2: Code switching* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/5iQuATmEbVw>

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