

REALITIES, RISKS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES:  
A CRITICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY  
AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF BICULTURALITY  
AMONG BLACK PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

A Dissertation  
by  
TRUDI KINCAID ADAMS-WIGGAN

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Abstract

REALITIES, RISKS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES:  
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Since entering the mainstream workforce as professionals in the 1970s, many Black women have faced both internal and external pressure to shift their personal appearance to make themselves more acceptable to White colleagues. The scholarship of Ella Bell (1990) paved the way for research on career-oriented Black women, and numerous scholars have subsequently contributed to theory on professional and working class Black women. Still, little substantive research exists on the personal appearance experiences of or pressures confronting Black professional women in higher education.

To begin filling that void, ten Black women academics employed in universities and professional institutions in the southeastern United States and the autoethnographic researcher participated in a qualitative study of personal appearance biculturality (also known as shifting) among Black professional women in the academy. Critical race theory (CRT),

critical race feminism, and autoethnography formed the theoretical framework for the study. This research sought to answer questions under articulated in the primary subject of academic scholarship: How have Black professional women described their experiences with shifting their personal appearance at work in the academy? What are the ways in which personal appearance shifting has manifested in Black professional women in academe? What have been the physical, emotional, and professional effects of personal appearance shifting on these Black women?

CRT's composite counter-story permitted research participants to voice their own realities with this phenomenon, and autoethnography enabled the researcher to disclose her experiences with personal appearance identity shifting as a full participant.

Findings revealed three major organizing themes for this study: Attitudes toward shifting, forms of shifting, and costs of shifting. Participants had two principal attitudes toward shifting their personal appearance at work in academe: They had choices and responsibilities. Their two choices centered on personal taste and convenience. Responsibilities involved professionalism, role modeling, and preservation of cultural practices. Their biculturality took two forms: variable and stable. Variable had to do with hair and dress which were easy to change; stable dealt with skin tone and body image which were more expensive, time consuming, or dangerous to alter. The effects of personal appearance shifting ultimately amounted to costs. These were either negative or positive. The loss of self-esteem or physical damage to the body was negative; gaining self-respect or the respect of students or colleagues was positive. Implications of the study and suggestions for future research are presented.