

The Unscripted

Series

Topic:
Code-switching

About

There are scripts running all the time in our society that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. Sociologists describe these scripts as social norms or mores which determine what is acceptable or unacceptable in any given culture. These norms are often represented in different types of coded social contracts. Some contracts are very formal in that they spell out explicit expectations and rules in technical language that govern the expectations and acceptable actions of stakeholders or citizens (E.g. Laws or legal documents). Other scripts like "the status quo" are much more informal and sometimes even go unspoken. These codes function as a very powerful force in creating, maintaining and perpetuating a state of affairs that governs how individuals and groups in society relate to each other. In the sections below, we hope to help you reconsider the codes that define what is "normal" and "acceptable". We know that we will only scratch the surface, but if we can help you become a little more conscious of how bias or prejudice operates within in our social contracts and coded communications, we will have taken a significant step toward unpacking the power of scripts in our society.

What?

Individuals and cultural communities have a deep need to express their individuality and uniquenesses. However, shared understanding of our expressions can quickly break down when they move beyond the safety and understanding of trusted family, friends and tribe members. In many ways that's because our forms of communication are encoded and decoded by our culture and those within it. When we communicate with others outside of a shared cultural context we can easily be misunderstood because our language of expression now operates in another cultural system that uses different codes. If you have ever visited another country and don't speak the language (or have used the wrong dialect) you'll quickly discover things don't always easily "transfer" from one cultural context to another. Code-switching is a savvy communication tactic frequently employed by members of minority groups to navigate encounters with those in power. It is an attempt to use familiar and mutually shared reference points often to "fit in" and make others feel more comfortable.

So What?

Code-switching can help bridge known gaps across many different cultural contexts from the professional workplace to translating between different languages and dialects. When you seek to "fit in" with dominant culture and the general public you are effectively code-switching. Unfortunately for those in under-represented groups, this frequently involves "hiding" one's culture to make those in the majority feel more comfortable. Because dominant cultural groups have the privilege of framing what is and is not considered an acceptable form of communication they don't usually need to code-switch. Those in power frame the rules of communication. Depending on prior experiences and operating cultural assumptions - when those in power encounter expressions that don't conform to the norm, they may become fearful, intolerant and seek to reframe the experience according to their language and rules. In extreme situations, if the "Other" is a perceived threat to the dominant culture then code-switching becomes a lifesaving tactic for those who are vulnerable. For example, when a person of color encounters an armed police officer the ability to code-switch may be the difference between life and death. If a suspect doesn't understand commands given by a police officer in English to "put your hands up" it can be mistaken as being uncooperative, antagonistic and even threatening. This is amplified by scripts that get played out in communities of practice that reinforce that people of color are deviant, violent and a threat. But even if the suspect understood the English language commands of the officer, they may not understand police culture. Countless Black children will recall their parents sitting them down to make sure they know what to do and say when they are confronted by the police. The ability to code switch can avoid a fatal ending to a "routine" traffic stop. One need only consider Sandra Bland who in 2015 was pulled over in Texas for failing to signal a lane change, arrested after an altercation with Officer Brian Encinia and found dead three days later in her jail cell.

Now What?

Here are some additional resources to help you take action:

- Read this NPR article entitled "Five Reasons Why People Code-Switch" <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/04/13/177126294/five-reasons-why-people-code-switch>
- [What is Code-Switching: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNbdn0yuUw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNbdn0yuUw8)
- [Wall Street Journal](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=sandra+bland+video) video of Sandra Bland arrest: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=sandra+bland+video>
- Read this online Guardian article: "Sorry to Bother You, black Americans and the power and peril of code-switching": <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/25/sorry-to-bother-you-white-voice-code-switching>
- Read this online Girl Boss article: "13 Women On The Real Emotional Toll Of Code-Switching At Work": <https://www.girlboss.com/read/code-switching-at-work>
- Read this online article by Alisa Gumbs.: "Code-Switching at Work Is Taking a Psychological Toll on Black Professionals": <https://www.blackenterprise.com/code-switching-at-work-black-professionals/>
- [Here are some activities for exploring code switching in the classroom: https://study.com/academy/lesson/code-switching-in-the-classroom.html](https://study.com/academy/lesson/code-switching-in-the-classroom.html)
- For a history of code switching check out: "The Neglected Early History of Codeswitching Research in the United States": https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234640326_The_Neglected_Early_History_of_Codeswitching_Research_in_the_United_States