

- This is "In My Shoes", a podcast about different perspectives on shared experiences across the University of Michigan campus. My name is Rebecca Fantone, the host of this podcast. In this episode, we're back with Monica and Priya to continue listening to their conversation about code-switching. In their previous discussion, Monica and Priya talked about what code-switching means to them and their personal experiences. Today, we will explore code-switching as a means of survival in white spaces and how code-switching is different for those with visible and invisible identities.

- Do you think code-switching helps or hurts efforts to be more inclusive? What are your thoughts on that?

- Well, one thing that I've constantly observed is that the people who code switch are always the people who are not in the majority. Which means the minority marginalized group is the one that is constantly having the need just to fit in and be comfortable and be recognized and be accepted, try to modify themselves into somebody else. And I don't know how that is fitting within the definition of inclusiveness. In fact, I would think it's the opposite. If somebody can be who they are and if they are valued for who they are and if they are recruited for what their strengths are without a portion of the evaluation at the interview being like, is this person fitting in? Are they wearing the right kind of clothes? Are they wearing the right kind of hair? Are they speaking the right kind of accent? If those things were not given weight in an interview, the chances of that person being evaluated for just their potential becomes higher. The chances of them being applicable or suitable for the promotion becomes higher. Leadership does not have to be based on what kind of an accent you speak. It definitely depends upon what kind of a spirit you are and what kind of action you can take to lead the team and motivate them. It should not be tied down to the clothes that you wear, or the accent that you have or the length and texture of your hair, I would say.

- I think that code-switching is a threat to true diversity. You cannot be your authentic self, therefore someone cannot really get to know you, the person. They're looking at your identities and code-switching can be very dangerous in that aspect, even though we do it, it's natural. I can't tell you the date that I started code-switching 'cause I don't know. I think it might've been the time when I was ostracized at whatever point that might've been and then realize, oh, I have to adapt. And I called myself the chameleon. I'm a Gemini. And I like to call myself a chameleon because in some places I can adapt easily. And then other times, I have to put on the mask and say, oh wait a minute, I'm in a room full of white men over 70, let's say and I'm not going to act the same way that I would when I'm in a room with you. If you know me, I don't feel like I have to code-switch as much. But if I'm walking into that room for the first time, I have to prove myself. I have to let you know and make you feel comfortable. And that's what code-switching is, is making the majority of whoever that is, to feel like I'm okay. I'm an okay person. It's okay to let down your boundaries with me and to give me that big project or to give me that raise or bonus. It's okay. And why should I have to do that? I mean at the end of the day no one else has to do that, except for marginalized people. And that can be frustrating and think about the psychological implications of that. Have you ever thought about that part of it?

- It's a huge amount of stress as work in itself is not stressful. And then you have the family stress as well. So over and above that, we are inducing and injecting this constant, it's like the undercurrent that is always there. The need to switch at the drop of a hat. You need to know how to behave yourself. And very aptly said, if I'm in an environment where there is a lot of white people, I'll have to be very cautious about the accent. the jargons I use, the terminologies that I'm gonna say to sound very smart. It probably is something entirely in my imagination that I have to do to fulfill that role. But then why should I have that doubt in itself at all? Why can I just not use my energies towards work rather than impressing or fitting into who I think they want to believe I am?

- I totally understand that. and the scary part, you don't know exactly what they're thinking about you and you don't know what identity they're looking at. They may not have a problem with you being an African-American person. But the fact that you're a woman or the fact that you're doing this particular role and no one can read minds. And like I tell the people that come to our classes, we tell ourselves a story. And that story can be very scary because we're telling ourselves they want us to behave a certain way. Like even in meetings, I feel that I can't laugh too much because they won't take me seriously. I feel that I can't not say something in a meeting because they're like, oh, she doesn't know what she's talking about because no, I'm just introverted most days, or it can be extroverted on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday, pick the day. But you don't know what they're looking at. Therefore, you don't know how to adapt. So code-switching is doing your best to adapt, but again you may not hit the mark and then it's a vicious cycle. It kinda goes back to the, okay, so they're still gonna have these opinions, but you're code-switching, you're getting stressed

ut and you don't even know if you're hitting the mark.

- Do you consider that our identities be visible or invisible? And how do you think this relates to your experiences with code-switching or somebody else's that you know, with respect to code-switching?

- Great question. Well, I know most of my identities are very visible. African-American, I'm a woman. You really can't tell about a lot of my other identities and my friends' identities. Like I have a friend who would look like they would be the majority or fit into what most people call the majority. But however, there are a lot that are invisible such as if you have a different sexual orientation or you have a different religion unless you're wearing maybe something on the outside or clothing that would show that. Or if you have a disability that people cannot see, 'cause a lot of people think, well disabilities can be shown. That's not always the case. Those people definitely have to code-switch, I believe. I know someone who shared a story with me that they can't walk down the street holding their partner's hand, they have to switch or they're not comfortable telling someone in their office or in a meeting, oh, my partner is a woman and they're not comfortable in that. They have to be very mindful of the words they speak. It's almost like walking on eggshells. And even though I don't feel I have to walk on eggshells because mine are totally visible, I can't hide them, some days I wish I could. Most days I don't because I'm very proud of who I am, but if I need to, there's no way I can get rid of me being my gender or my race or whatever that might look like. Or age. I'd like to say I'm in that sweet spot when it comes to the IT world of being kind of middle age. But again, a lot of people when we talk about diversity and what it means to code-switch, they're thinking of maybe only race and gender, but there's so much more. Especially now with a lot of the mental illnesses that we see or don't see, again being invisible. And I can not understand. A lot of people say walking in your shoes. I can walk in my shoes, but I'm not gonna walk in your shoes. I can't, there's no way. And there's other people who have the outside shell of being this perfected person that is not necessarily the case and the things that they have to deal with and the turmoil that they have to go through

- Very well said. I have a family member who himself has a physical disability. And I know the struggle that he had to go through in his life in order to fit in and prove himself constantly to be somebody who's capable of just like any other person because you're not tested on your physical ability. For the most time, it's always your mental ability that you're working for. Very well said about mental health and disability and people who suffer from invisible differences that they have to struggle with on a daily basis to code-switch.

- Code-switching definitely threatens not only diversity but that can be a mental health issue as well. I firmly believe that. And I think once more research is actually done with code-switching and mental health, that could be actually a very good topic that someone could probably look into because it can be so stressful. And I don't feel that I'm stressed, but I don't have to go through a lot of those changes that I think other people have. And plus I'm older and I've learned how to adapt. And I think once you understand the world in which you live in and the world in which you work in, it just becomes natural. And when I'm 60, 70 years old, I probably won't even look back and think, but the work that we're doing, both of us, I think is really good work. I'm so glad that we developed that class together. I think we both learned a lot and I just wanna say thank you and I thank you for this conversation.

- Thank you so much.

- I really enjoyed it.

- It's a great opportunity to learn and bring upfront as to how much of a mental health issue this could eventually lead to. Thank you so much, Monica.

- Thank you.

- That was Monica and Priya. And thanks for listening. In our next episode, we'll continue to explore code-switching through the personal experiences of a UM graduate student and a postdoctoral researcher here at UM. Thank you for listening to "In My Shoes", a podcast about different perspectives on shared experiences across the University of Michigan campus. "In My Shoes" was produced with the support from the University of Michigan Center for Academic Innovation. This episode was edited by Ellie Dafdor. Find us on Spotify, Apple podcasts or SoundCloud. For updates on the most recent episodes, follow us on Twitter @InMyShoes.