Introduction

After a long day at work, a white woman sits down for a late-afternoon team meeting next to a Black woman, whose binders and other materials are spread out on the table around her. The white woman nudges the Black woman’s materials aside as she sits down. “Why are you moving my stuff?” asks the Black woman. The white woman responds, “Why are you being so aggressive? I was just sitting down.” The Black woman, now visibly angry, says, “Aggressive? Do you even know you’re being racist right now?” The white woman, tears in her eyes, approaches their supervisor and asks to be moved to another team.¹

The emotion relayed in this simple story of two people interacting at work is tied to race; it is, in other words, racial emotion. The Black woman is offended by what she sees as someone judging her according to a racial stereotype. The white woman is shocked and ashamed at being called racist. That said, if this were all we took from the story—that our emotions can sometimes involve race—we might make note and move on to bigger problems. But it’s not just that these people’s emotions involve race. It’s that their responses to those emotions are likely to lead to less interaction going forward and therefore less opportunity for them to forge a relationship across racial lines, a relationship that can have positive as well as negative emotions in the mix.
What’s more, the emotions of these coworkers are not solely a matter of their individual histories or attitudes. Their racial emotions are shaped by our present institutions, among them the organization for which they work and also the law that guides our views about which racial emotions and behaviors are acceptable and when, and which are not. Imagine the scenario playing out one step further: At being asked to move the white woman to another team, the supervisor makes a judgment about whose racial emotion or behavior is legitimate and should be valued. Or maybe the Black woman or the white woman, or both, will complain to HR about the incident as involving racial bias; here, too, someone will determine what happened and what should be done, and that determination may involve judgments about what racial emotion should look like and whose racial emotion is more important and why.

Once we see some of the possible implications of racial emotions in this simple scenario—implications such as how often these two people are likely to interact in the future, who is likely to get moved and who is deemed a “troublemaker,” even whether this single interaction is understood as a one-off or as part of broader workplace concern—we can begin to see that our racial emotions in our interactions at work have real-world consequences not just for us and our relations at work but for racial equality and justice. And this makes our racial emotions part of a problem that is well worth our time to consider in more depth. To fail to do so would be to enact continued injustice and inequality in our lives.

It can be difficult to find words for our emotions, which may be one reason some of us don’t talk about them much, at least not outside of our most intimate spaces. But that doesn’t mean our emotions aren’t there. In fact, emotions push our behavior in sometimes surprising ways. They can lead us to act unfriendly, for example, even when we don’t mean to, and they can lead us to avoid important interactions and conversations. This book is about emotions when it comes to race, a subject that is itself a touchy one. But that’s exactly the point. Emotions rise up during and around interactions with others every day, and some of those emotions have to do with race.
Racial emotion most broadly is the emotion related to race that people experience when they engage with the world. This makes racial emotion part of all of our lives, even as we experience it in sometimes radically different ways. We can feel racial emotion in response to physical objects, like a noose or the confederate flag, or in response to physical spaces, like the feelings that surface when we walk alone into a room full of people of a race different from our own. We can feel racial emotion in response to a movie or a writing or a real-world scene like the brutal murder of George Floyd caught on video in Minneapolis or the anger-fueled mass shooting of Black people in Buffalo last spring. In fact, when we think about racial emotion broadly in this way, it becomes obvious that racial emotion is everywhere. We feel racial emotion in our protests, on our street corners and our campuses, and at our dinner tables across the country. Our racial emotions propel us into action—and sometimes pull us into despair. Yet despite the obviousness of emotion involving race in all of our lives, there has been very little attention paid, especially by whites, to racial emotion as it is experienced in and affects our daily interactions. If anything, one effort has been to bury racial emotion—the movement in many states to pass statutes that prevent the teaching of “divisive concepts” serves as a prominent example—rather than to acknowledge and assess it.

We are in a time of racial reckoning in the United States, a time when calls to recognize our racial emotions are building and spreading. I am a white woman law professor who teaches at a law school with a racially diverse student body. As I saw the daily experience of students of color become ever more hostile under the Trump administration and the press of violence on Black and brown bodies, I also saw those students rise to speak. Students are forming racial coalitions—and calling for change. They tell us that we expect them to be “professional,” which they take to mean “neutral, rational, and devoid of feeling,” even when the law that we teach is embedded with racialized injustice. We leave no leeway for feelings to be aired or understood. This generation is joining with others to look at things differently (and in many circumstances reinvigorating calls that have long been ignored); they are asking for a disruption of silence, for space for conversation and learning about our racial experiences within institutions and also the relevance of our identities and experiences outside of those institutions for the work that we do within them.
This book is one way of acting on this call. It seeks learning over silence in one slice of racial emotion in our lives: our interpersonal relations at work. Indeed, what we are missing as we debate next steps for racial justice is that racial emotion surfaces not only in moments of heartbreaking violence; it also surfaces in our more mundane day-to-day interactions, both our interactions with members of other races and with members of our own. And, importantly, racial emotion surfaces in our interactions at work. It can lead to disparities in outcomes, who is fired and who is promoted, who is paid more or less, and who gets which assignment or schedule. And it can undermine our efforts to forge connections, even friendships, and to thereby advance racial equality and justice.

This book focuses on racial emotion in our interpersonal interactions at work for two reasons: first, understanding our race-related emotions in interactions—and our behaviors associated with those emotions—helps us see how important those emotions are for reducing discrimination, enhancing social ties, and increasing equality; second, focusing on racial emotions at work allows us to probe the influence of context on those relations and especially context as it is created by work organizations and shaped by the law. We are at a moment when many people are seeing more clearly how structures, systems, and cultures drive racial injustice. As workers and others with influence on work organizations, we can and should have something to say about how those organizations and the laws that govern them structure our relations and affect our emotions, behaviors, and interactions.

**Hearts and Minds**

Interest has been rising over the past decade or so in the workings of the mind and discrimination. The terms implicit bias and cognitive bias are increasingly mainstream, as evidenced by the numerous recent calls for antibias and diversity training in our courtrooms, our schools, and across public and private work sectors. Bias training, it sometimes seems, is everywhere. We know more today than ever about “blindspots” in our judgments and decisions because attention to these biases in research, education efforts, and especially in mass media has increased. We’re not
just studying it more; we’re talking about it more. Malcolm Gladwell devoted a substantial portion of his bestselling *Blink* to the science of implicit bias, and Oprah Winfrey brought Gladwell and a prominent implicit bias researcher, social psychologist Anthony Greenwald, onto her show back in 2010. Implicit bias even made it into the 2016 presidential debate, where Hillary Clinton mentioned its role in police shootings.

This is an important development, one that can open us to new ways of shifting and countering our biases to reduce discrimination in work, whether we are reading a resume, evaluating someone’s job performance, or reviewing a file for a pay raise or promotion. It can also lead to changes in our institutions—in the ways that we structure our job interviews or develop applicant pools and mentoring programs, for example—and not just in our attention to our own biases.\(^6\)

We’ve heard much less, though, about the ways that our emotions can affect our behaviors and lead to discrimination. The focus has been almost exclusively on the operation of what are often seen as “cool” cognitive biases and stereotypes over “hotter” emotional response. This is the case even as emotion takes an increasingly central position in the study of interracial interaction in the social sciences. Our emotions are inextricably intertwined with our perceptions and brain processing, as we will see. And yet they are also worth considering separately as we seek to understand the problem of discrimination and possible solutions to it.

If all we do is implement implicit bias training, as many companies, government offices, courthouses, and universities currently do, we will miss the mark. We will end up knowing more about our individual biases, to be sure, but we will continue to know too little about how our biases and emotions together affect our interactions and relationships and how and why our institutions like workplaces and laws shape our racial emotions and favor some racial emotions over others—and, most importantly, what we need to do differently.

The now-amassing social science research tells us that reducing negative emotion experienced by members of all racial groups in interracial interaction is an important key to reducing prejudice and intergroup inequality, not only in the workplace but beyond in our families, neighborhoods, and schools. For many Americans today, the workplace is the place where people of different races are most likely to interact on a sustained
basis, which means that it provides a principal site for the kind of interracial interaction that can reduce negative racial emotion, even generate positive racial emotion. Yet this same research suggests that racial emotion in most workplaces today is likely to be negative—we are likely to experience emotions like fear, disgust, anger, shame, envy, frustration, and anxiety—and that the brunt of this negative emotion and its consequences are likely to be borne by people of color. Negative racial emotions in interactions tend to lead to behaviors that are detrimental to our relationships, behaviors like avoidance and antagonism. Responding to our emotions, we pull away—and sometimes even lash out. But positive racial emotions, emotions like affection, respect, admiration, joy, pride, sympathy, and compassion, are possible. And perhaps most promising, even in the face of discomfort, there is another way toward stronger relationships over time: engagement.

INDEPENDENTS, INSTITUTIONS, AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Although we will learn about our racial emotions and take lessons from the research for our own interracial interactions in this book, the book is less about how we as individuals can feel better about race, and more about how we as citizens, workers, and leaders can structure our institutions—especially our law and our work organizations—to be more equitable so that our interracial interactions at work will involve positive emotions rather than negative ones over the long term. Indeed, restructuring our law and work organizations to see racial emotion and opening ourselves to understand our own emotions, and especially our behaviors around race, will likely lead in the short term to more uncomfortable conversations, not fewer.

Hewing too closely to our minds and hearts or even our individual relationships can blind us to the ways that our institutions influence our day-to-day interactions and, yes, our emotions. By choosing what to recognize as racial emotion and by judging racial emotion once it is recognized, our law and our work organizations alike play a substantial role in constructing our relations and our racial emotions within them. Legislators, judges, lawyers, and leaders in work organizations, in addition to the individuals
who do the interacting on a day-to-day basis, are active participants in the
construction of racial emotion, just as they are participants in the con-
struction of race.

When our work organizations and law tell us that some white racial
emotions are more valuable—by protecting whites from emotions associ-
ated with being perceived as biased or racist, for example—and that some
racial emotions of people of color are overplayed or out of line—by pun-
ishing those who raise racial concerns, for example, or by siphoning racial
emotions associated with racial insults and assaults against people of
color into the solely “personal”—our institutions are actively setting up
people of color for less success in work than their white counterparts. And
they are actively (even if unintentionally) sabotaging our efforts to build
stronger racial relationships at work.

This book tells a story of our institutions and their treatment of racial
emotion at the same time that it teaches us about our own emotions. As
we will see, both our law and our work organizations largely close racial
emotion out of antidiscrimination concern. At the same time, they con-
struct racial emotion repertoires—stories and expectations around racial
emotion—that favor the racial emotions experienced by whites and that
place the brunt of negative consequences of racial emotions on people of
color. If we’ve learned anything during these times of renewed action fol-
lowing the murder of George Floyd, it is that racial progress requires us to
attend to discrimination within and by our institutions, not just in our
hearts and minds. That is the project of this book.

The book is organized in three parts. In the first, we explore what racial
emotion is and what it means for our behaviors and our interactions at
work. Through attention to key social science research, we see racial emo-
tion in interracial interactions in action and we learn why racial emotion
in most workplaces today is likely to be negative rather than positive, lead-
ing to weak and ruptured interracial ties. We also see glimmers of hope in
this research, ways that interactions can be structured to open space for
developing more positive racial emotion at work.

In part II, we turn to our institutions: law and work organizations.
Racial emotion is misunderstood and skewed in especially troubling ways
in law, which sends signals to employees about what amounts to discrirn-
ination and their rights with respect to it and also to employers about what
can and should be done. Discrimination has long been understood to involve a substantial emotional component. Prejudice, after all, has animus—a hate- or disgust-related emotion—as its taproot. Despite this history (or perhaps because of it), courts and commentators today tend to conceptualize emotion in discrimination as a one-directional personal state revolving around antipathy or group-based animus by whites rather than as potentially involving multiple emotions that can emerge and change in the process of social interaction. The result is a static notion of prejudice as residing in individual mindsets rather than a contextual idea of racial emotions as they play out in day-to-day relations.

Courts have developed and applied the law of employment discrimination to reflect this narrow view, placing racial emotion outside of antidiscrimination concern. They do so in at least three often interrelated and overlapping ways: (1) by refusing to see emotion in interracial interaction when it occurs; (2) by categorizing emotion in interracial interaction when they see it as “personal” and thereby not racial; and (3) by judging the racial emotion that they do acknowledge as unreasonable. We can see judges doing this with a close look at some judicial opinions involving race and discrimination under the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, our preeminent federal law prohibiting discrimination in employment. By closing racial emotion out of antidiscrimination concern in these cases in both the design and application of the law, judges signal that addressing racial emotion is not important to reducing discrimination. What’s more, they place the burden of bearing the negative consequences of racial emotion on people of color.

There is one prominent exception to this general closing out of racial emotion from antidiscrimination concern by law and work organizations: whites who are called or perceive themselves as being called racist. Here, we see that judges are not just undersensitive to some racial emotions of people of color. They are also oversensitive to some racial emotions of whites, seeking to frame whites as innocent and to protect them from emotional discomfort and shame.

Our work organizations could create space for positive racial emotion apart from law, but there is little reason to believe that they currently do. Work organizations have a long history of regulating and shaping emotion generally, including a move toward seeing individuals as exclusively
“responsible” for their own emotions, and also racial emotion specifically, even as they seek to capitalize on diversity in racialized ways. Indeed, we see in part II that work organizations place emotional labor on racial minorities disproportionately and regulate their emotions differently than they regulate the emotions of whites. We have known for some time that work “feeling rules” can reinforce gender boundaries by specifying which emotional displays are acceptable for men and for women. It turns out that feeling rules are also racialized: Whites are allowed to show anger in some circumstances, for example, when people of color are not. And organizations today go further. They ask people of color to do “diversity” work, to be the face of diversity for the organization, while building narratives of diversity that celebrate static identity states without attention to relations. These are just some of the ways that our work organizations currently cue race without attending to racial emotion, thereby setting people of color up as complainers and “bad” workers when they experience and express racial emotions around bias and discrimination at work.

In part III, we revisit the social science research on racial emotion in interaction to consider what is wrong with the prevailing approach of law and work organizations—and we identify solutions. In short, the prevailing approach to racial emotion misses discrimination and disadvantage at work, leaving racial minorities to bear the brunt of negative emotions and their relational consequences. This makes racial emotion at work something we should be concerned about if we seek equality in employment, as our civil rights laws do. But importantly the current approach is also likely to leave society worse off by fostering negative rather than positive interracial interactions at work, thereby cutting off and preventing the kind of interracial relationships that can break down prejudice and inequality.

To open space for developing positive interracial interactions at work, the law needs both to recognize racial emotion fairly as a source of discrimination and to trigger structural and cultural changes within organizations that will create conditions for conversation and learning across difference. Law and organizations alike need to shift their repertoires for racial emotion to more fairly allocate the burdens of racial emotion and to create the space needed to build positive interracial relations in the long term.

The book then digs into how to do this—offering suggestions for citizens, workers, and leaders seeking to make racial justice progress a reality
at work. I present three broad measures for shifting our institutions’ approach to racial emotion. The first, *Seeing Discrimination*, involves bringing racial emotion into antidiscrimination concern by acknowledging individual behaviors of racial assault, behaviors that are most likely to be disastrous for our interracial relations, while otherwise widening our lens to focus on systems and structures over individuals. The second, *Shifting Repertoires*, seeks to redefine the “good” worker and to expand our language for racial emotion at work. The third, *Sharing Discomfort*, involves undertaking a vision of integration that asks for sharing the burden of discomfort in difference. Together, these proposals shift our institutional approach to racial emotion, drawing it consistently into antidiscrimination concern, and can open space for learning and engagement in our interracial interactions at work. With action at the forefront, I also delineate a set of concrete recommendations that flow from these broad proposals, recommendations that span law, work organizations, and our individual lives.

These measures meet our moment with more than mere words to disrupt the silence around racial emotion. To make a difference, we will have to act, not just listen, talk, and learn. And yet, while changing our institutions is key, it is individuals who are the heroes in all of this. We are the ones who will make the shifts not just in how we understand and navigate our own racial emotions but also in how our institutions structure and shape those emotions for ourselves and others.