
Career Wellbeing Among Racialized Lawyers in Canadian Law Firms

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Abstract

The upward mobility of racialized lawyers within Canadian law firms continues to lag behind that of their White counterparts. While some progress has been made in recruitment, significant disparities remain in retention and promotion. This qualitative study explores how racialized lawyers experience working in Canadian law firms and how these experiences impact their career wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 racialized lawyers, and the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The themes identified were informed by existing literature on organizational dynamics and professional inequality and included tokenism processes (hypervisibility, role encapsulation and boundary heightening), bias (status expectations and homophily preferences) and organizational norms (professional and emotion), as well as several subthemes. These themes and subthemes were linked to diminished access to meaningful work, positive relationships with colleagues, career growth opportunities, perceived organizational support and autonomy—all core dimensions of career wellbeing. The findings reveal the cumulative psychological and structural burdens racialized lawyers face and underscore the need to embed equity into law firm culture in ways that meaningfully support career wellbeing, particularly amid increasing sociopolitical resistance to DEI efforts.

Keywords: career wellbeing, racialized lawyers, diversity, equity and inclusion, thematic analysis, tokenism, racial bias, organizational norms

In recent years, the issue of racial diversity within Canadian law firms has garnered significant attention. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many law firms made bold and public commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI) and allocated substantial resources to recruiting more racial minorities and fostering a more inclusive working environment (National Association for Law Placement (NALP), 2020). These commitments signaled a long-overdue recognition of the structural barriers that have historically limited racialized professionals' access to and advancement within such institutions. Recently, however, the momentum behind DEI initiatives has faced increasing challenges. In the United States, political opposition and legal rulings have contributed to the scaling back or outright dismantling of DEI initiatives across sectors (Dollens & Sharperson, 2025; Goldberg et al., 2025; Weiss, 2025). This resistance is increasingly evident in Canada as well, where some organizations, including law firms, are retreating from their earlier commitments amid fears of reputational risk or ideological scrutiny (e.g. Carolino, 2025; Freeman, 2025).

Within this changing landscape, the legal profession stands at a crossroads. Law firms remain some of Canada's most homogenous and hierarchical institutions. Despite a steady increase in the number of racialized individuals entering the legal profession over the last decade, their upward mobility within Canadian law firms continues to lag behind that of their White counterparts. This persistent disparity has been linked to disproportionately high attrition rates among Canadian racialized lawyers (NALP Foundation, 2025)—a pattern similarly observed in the United States (American Bar Association, 2022; NALP Foundation, 2025). Notably, these trends have persisted despite the recent focus on DEI across the legal sector, raising critical questions about the efficacy of such efforts to date.

The present study uses the concept of career wellbeing to shed light on why racialized lawyers are leaving Canadian law firms at higher rates than White lawyers, contributing to underrepresentation within the highest ranks of Canadian law firms. Using a theory-driven thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Canadian racialized lawyers, this study investigates how processes such as tokenism, bias, and organizational norms operate within law firm environments and affect racialized lawyers' access to resources that support career wellbeing. The findings contribute to a growing body of work advocating for more nuanced, relational, and psychologically informed approaches to inclusion in professional settings and offer insight into how inclusion efforts might be reimaged in an era of DEI backlash.

Career Wellbeing

Career wellbeing can be understood as the experience of positive affect in relation to one's career (Kidd, 2008). Unlike job satisfaction, which typically captures contentment with one's current role or work conditions at a specific point in time, career wellbeing encompasses a broader, longitudinal experience of purpose, growth, alignment with personal values, and relational support across the span of one's professional life. It reflects not only how satisfied someone feels in a given position, but whether their career as a whole contributes to their sense of identity, agency, and life satisfaction (Bester, 2019; Kidd, 2008). Poor career wellbeing is associated with lower levels of productivity, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and engagement as well as negative psychological and health effects such as increased stress, anxiety, depression and burnout (Agrawal & Harter, 2009; Burke, 2019; Somers et al., 2018). Consequently, employees experiencing poor career wellbeing are more likely to look for new opportunities outside of their current organization (Bester, 2019). As such, career wellbeing is a useful construct for understanding attrition intentions amongst employees.

Crucially, career wellbeing is not simply the outcome of individual choices or personality traits— it is also produced and constrained by broader structural, cultural, and relational forces within organizations. Research highlights five core organizational factors that influence career wellbeing: 1) access to meaningful work, 2) opportunities for career growth, 3) positive relationships with colleagues, 4) perceived organizational support and 5) autonomy (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Access to meaningful work refers to the extent to which individuals find their tasks personally significant, worthwhile, and aligned with their values and interests (Rosso et al., 2010). Opportunities for career growth involve access to skill-building assignments, visibility-enhancing roles, mentorship, and pathways to advancement that allow employees to progress toward their professional goals (Kidd, 2008). Positive relationships with colleagues provide emotional support, information sharing, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to psychological safety and career development (Kim & Lee, 2009). Perceived organizational support reflects employees' beliefs that their employer values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing, often shaped by fair treatment, supervisor support, and investment in employee success through access to benefits and compensation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Autonomy refers to the ability to exercise control over one's work and career path, including the freedom to make decisions and act authentically (Chen, 2017; Kirven, 2018). Together, these factors foster long-term engagement, fulfillment, and retention (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Organizational Processes Influencing Career Wellbeing

This study also draws on several complementary lines of research that help explain how law firm environments may shape the experiences and, consequently, the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers. These include: (1) tokenism theory, which examines the consequences of numerical underrepresentation within organizations; (2) status expectations theory and homophily theory, which offer theoretical explanations for how certain forms of bias shape workplace interactions and evaluations; and (3) research on professionalism and emotion norms.

Originally developed in the context of gender representation, Kanter's (1977, 1978) theory of tokenism posits that individuals who are numerically underrepresented within organizations will experience a certain set of social processes: hypervisibility, boundary heightening and role encapsulation. Hypervisibility refers to the heightened scrutiny and surveillance token individuals face due to their numerical minority, which leads to increased performance pressure, as their missteps are more likely to be noticed by the majority group and seen as representative of both their abilities and the abilities of the entire token group. Boundary heightening occurs when majority group members exaggerate differences and reinforce social distance, often through exclusion from informal networks and cultural signaling that emphasizes the outsider status of tokens. Role encapsulation involves limiting token individuals to stereotyped roles or expectations based on their identity, which can undermine professional development and recognition. Role encapsulation can take the form of status leveling, whereby token group members are misidentified as individuals who hold lower-level jobs, and stereotyped role assignments, whereby token group members are assigned work due to their identity rather than their skills or interests. These processes have been linked to lower job satisfaction, increased psychological

distress, and increased turnover intentions for members of token groups (King et al., 2010; Settles et al., 2019). Importantly, research has demonstrated the importance of not only group size, but also of group status in how tokenism processes are experienced. Members of token groups are more likely to experience the negative effects of tokenism if they are part of a “low-status” groups (Yoder, 1991). As men and Whites have historically enjoyed higher social status in Western culture, they are generally considered members of “high-status” groups while women and non-Whites, are considered members of “low-status” groups (Ridgeway, 2014; Strohshine & Brandl, 2011).

In addition to the negative effects of tokenization, racialized professionals must navigate explicit and implicit biases that shape perceptions of their competence, legitimacy, and likeability in the workplace. Status expectations theory posits that individuals are evaluated within organizations not only on the basis of task-related credentials or demonstrated performance, but also through the lens of culturally shared, often unconscious beliefs about social group competence (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). These expectations are informed by ascribed characteristics such as race, gender, and age, that are not directly related to job performance but have acquired symbolic significance in broader societal hierarchies (Ridgeway, 2014).

Within Western professional contexts, including law, the intersection of Whiteness and masculinity continues to be culturally coded as indicative of authority, objectivity, and competence (Ridgeway, 2001). As a result, according to status expectations theory, racialized individuals, particularly women of colour, may be subject to lower baseline competence expectations, even when possessing equivalent or superior credentials to their White male peers (Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Consequently, racialized employees are often held to higher performance standards while receiving less recognition for their successes. These asymmetrical expectations can manifest in a number of subtle but cumulative disadvantages, such as being assigned less complex or lower-profile work, receiving less generous feedback, or being overlooked for advancement opportunities (Ridgeway, 2014; Roth, 2004).

Homophily preferences, the tendency for individuals to associate with those perceived to be similar to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001), can compound the effects of status expectations by influencing the formation of workplace relationships, networks, and support systems. In professional environments, similarity across visible social categories such as race, gender, and age often serves as a proxy for shared values, communication styles, and worldviews (Leszczensky & Pink, 2019; McPherson et al., 2001). Consequently, when organizational leadership and the dominant cultural milieu are predominantly White, racialized employees may find themselves excluded from informal social networks and relationship-based forms of professional capital (Taylor, 2010).

Organizational norms related to professionalism and the expression of emotion can also have a significant impact on the experiences of racialized employees. Professionalism is typically defined as the ability to demonstrate technical expertise and behavioural conduct (e.g. speech patterns and dress codes) that align with workplace expectations (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). In Canada’s legal profession, as in many elite white-collar fields, professionalism norms have been shaped by the historical overrepresentation of White, male professionals in leadership roles (Rosette et al., 2008). As a result, the markers of professionalism often align with White, Western cultural scripts.

For racialized professionals, especially those whose cultural identities diverge from these expectations, success may therefore require strategic identity management, such as “code-switching” (McCluney et al., 2019, 2021). Code-switching (i.e. altering speech, behaviours, or presentation to conform to dominant norms) can enhance perceived professionalism and increase access to opportunity and has long been a strategy used by racialized individuals to excel in White cultural spaces (Ibarra, 1995; Roberts, 2005). However, it also imposes emotional and psychological costs, including identity strain, reduced authenticity, and lower organizational commitment (Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2019; Roulin & Krings, 2020).

Closely linked to professionalism norms are emotion norms—unwritten rules that govern which emotions can be expressed, to what extent, and by whom in workplace contexts (Hochschild, 2012; Wingfield, 2010). Professionals who are able to navigate emotion norms effectively are often perceived as more competent, promotable, and leadership-ready (Cha et al., 2019). However, these norms result in what Hochschild (2012) termed “emotional labour”: the process of managing one’s feelings to align with workplace expectations.

As emotion norms are typically shaped by the dominant workplace culture, they are racialized and gendered in ways that create different expectations for emotional expression for members of minority groups (Cox, 2016; Froyum, 2018; Wingfield, 2010). Consequently, for racialized professionals, emotional labour is intensified by the need to adhere to racialized “feeling rules”—differential expectations about emotional expression based on race (Cox, 2016; Wingfield, 2010). These constraints not only limit emotional authenticity but also increase psychological strain, contributing to lower job satisfaction (Sloan & Unnever, 2016). They also function as gatekeeping mechanisms that limit access to influence and advancement for those who cannot or choose not to conform. For example, Black professionals are often expected to suppress displays of anger or frustration to avoid being labeled as threatening or unprofessional, even in situations where White colleagues might express similar emotions without consequence (Harlow, 2003; Wingfield, 2010).

Methods

Participants

Participants were 19 English-speaking lawyers who, at the time of data collection, either currently (73.7%, $n = 14$) or previously (26.3%, $n = 5$) practiced law as licensed lawyers within Canadian law firms and self-identified as racialized. For the purposes of this study, the term “racialized” follows the definition of “visible minority” as outlined in Canada’s Employment Equity Act (S.C. 1995, c. 44).

The sample reflected a diversity of demographic and professional backgrounds. Participants identified as female (63.2%, $n = 12$) or male (36.8%, $n = 7$). Age ranged from 25 to 44 years, with the largest group between 30–34 years (52.6%, $n = 10$). Racial/ethnic identities included Arab (15.8%, $n = 3$), Black (15.8%, $n = 3$), Chinese (36.8%, $n = 7$), Japanese (5.3%, $n = 1$), Korean (5.3%, $n = 1$), South Asian (10.5%, $n = 2$), and Other (10.5%, $n = 2$). These categories mirror those identified in the Employment Equity Act. Most participants were licensed in Ontario (94.7%, $n = 18$), while one participant was licensed in Alberta.

Most participants were currently practicing as lawyers within law firms (73.7%, $n = 14$), some had left private practice and were working as in-house lawyers (15.8%, $n = 3$), while others had left the practice of law altogether (10.5%, $n = 2$). Participants held varying levels of seniority (either currently or immediately before leaving private practice): junior associate (26.3%, $n = 5$), mid-level associate (36.8%, $n = 7$), senior associate (26.3%, $n = 5$), and equity partner (10.5%, $n = 2$). It should be noted however, that those who identified as equity partners worked at firms that they personally founded. Participants worked in firms of different sizes: 2–10 lawyers (21.1%, $n = 4$), 11–50 lawyers (21.1%, $n = 4$), and over 50 lawyers (57.8%, $n = 11$). All participants reported that they currently or previously worked at a law firm where racialized lawyers were in the minority. Areas of practice spanned a wide range, including antitrust, criminal, environmental, finance, health, Indigenous, human rights, labour and employment, mergers and acquisitions, real estate, securities, and tax law. This demographic and professional diversity was key to ensuring the data captured both commonalities and divergences in experience across domains.

Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants whose identities and career paths reflected the varied backgrounds and professional experiences of racialized lawyers across Canada. Recruitment took place via social media (LinkedIn and Facebook) using a research poster. Prospective participants contacted the primary researcher by email and were screened for eligibility based on self-identified racialization, legal practice history and work experience in Canadian law firms. Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics board prior to participant recruitment.

Eligible participants were sent a consent form and demographic survey through REDCap. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide with 14 open-ended questions was used to explore themes related to firm culture, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, perceptions of DEI initiatives, and the perceived impact of race and identity on participants’ career experiences and trajectories. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent, transcribed verbatim

using a secure transcription service and manually reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were anonymized and stored on a secure, encrypted server. Participant recruitment began in December 2022 and data collection was completed in March 2023.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the primary author using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). A theory-driven, deductive approach was employed. That is, while theoretical concepts (e.g. tokenism) oriented the analysis, coding remained open to patterns that complicated, stretched, or challenged those concepts. Coding proceeded through repeated and immersive readings of the transcripts, during which the primary author generated codes that captured theoretically relevant features of participants' accounts. Candidate themes were developed by examining connections, tensions, and patterned meanings across codes, guided both by the theoretical aims of the study and the experiential depth of participants' narratives. These themes were refined to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and meaningful contribution to the research aims.

Reflexive practice was central throughout the analysis. The primary author engaged in ongoing reflexive memo writing and explicit reflection on their theoretical commitments and positionality—including the influence of being a former non-racialized lawyer interpreting racialized participants' experiences. As emphasized in the RTA literature, such reflexive engagement serves not to eliminate subjectivity but to make it visible and analytically productive, supporting more thoughtful and transparent meaning-making. For example, through reflexive practice, the primary author recognized that they may have been more attuned to structural and procedural dynamics within law firms than to the subtleties of navigating racialization in these spaces. This awareness served as an ongoing reflexive reminder that their interpretations were situated rather than neutral, and that certain experiential nuances may have been differently apprehended by a researcher with lived experience of racialization.

Results

Participants described a set of recurring and interrelated experiences that shaped their professional lives within Canadian law firms. These experiences were organized into six core themes. Each of the three tokenism processes—hypervisibility, boundary heightening, and role encapsulation—emerged as distinct themes. Within hypervisibility, two sub-themes were identified: performance pressure and coping mechanisms. Role encapsulation also included two sub-themes: status leveling and stereotyped role assignment. Two additional themes reflected forms of bias—status expectations and homophily preferences. Lastly, two themes related to organizational norms were identified: professionalism norms and emotion norms. Within these, code-switching emerged as a sub-theme of professionalism norms, while racialized feeling rules and emotion management were sub-themes of emotion norms. Together, these themes illustrated how racialized lawyers encountered unique interpersonal, institutional, and psychological pressures that affected not only their day-to-day work experiences but also their sense of legitimacy, belonging, and long-term career goals. Unless otherwise reported, no demographic (e.g. age, gender, race/ethnicity) or occupational (e.g. level of seniority, size of law firm) patterns were observed in the data.

Hypervisibility was among the most reported experiences by participants ($n=18$). The majority of the study's participants associated being a racialized lawyer with a strong sense of pride and achievement. However, they also described a persistent awareness of standing out and being perceived as different from the predominately White lawyers at their firms. Many ($n=12$) felt that such heightened visibility led to increased scrutiny of their performance. As a result, some participants felt as though any mistake they made could be potentially career-ending, which caused them intense stress and anxiety. One participant recalled how this pressure led them to develop significant mental health issues during their time at a law firm:

I just felt that they would dissect what you do more. So, yeah, that extra pressure, that's kind of what led to all the anxiety and the binge eating and all that stuff because you're like, I can't mess up. I'm not afforded

an opportunity to mess up because if I mess up once, I'm never gonna get another opportunity again. Like they're just never gonna send me any other work.

Participants also described feeling as though they needed to prove that they were hired or received opportunities due to their merit rather than their race. They felt that because they stood out as different from the majority of lawyers within their firm, it was often assumed that they were hired for diversity reasons. As a result, participants felt pressure to perform at a high level to demonstrate that they were equally as deserving of their position as those in the majority group. Several participants noted that the need to prove one's merit and the resulting performance pressure is never-ending for racialized lawyers – even once they are made partner – because there will always be an underlying question as to whether their success is due to their race rather than their abilities that can only be answered by producing excellent work. Some participants also described feeling performance pressure because of the symbolic consequences of their successes or failures within the firm. They worried that their shortcomings might be seen as representative of the abilities of other lawyers sharing their racial or ethnic background. Relatedly, several participants reported feeling both internal and external pressure to strive for partnership in order to be a positive role model for others that share their racial identity. As one participant put it: “[T]here’s a lot of pressure - a lot of it internal, but some of it external, that you have to be the great hope for your specific identity”.

Many participants ($n=13$) described engaging in emotionally costly coping strategies such as working significantly harder than their White peers to limit the occurrence of high-profile mistakes and dispel doubts about their merit or managing their visibility by avoiding behaviours that might reinforce their perceived “otherness,” including asking for accommodations, seeking mental health support, or participating in racial affinity groups.

Boundary heightening further shaped participants’ law firm experiences. Many participants ($n=15$) reported experiences of social exclusion within their predominantly White law firms, particularly in relation to informal professional and networking opportunities. Participants described how access to these opportunities was often mediated through cultural familiarity with activities typically associated with White, upper-middle-class male norms, such as attending sporting events, playing golf or engaging in alcohol-centered socializing. Several participants noted that they were either not invited to these events or were unable to fully participate due to cultural, religious, or experiential differences. They felt that this exclusion had tangible implications for business development and mentorship, as such events were frequently cited by participants as important venues for relationship-building with colleagues and clients.

In addition, participants reported challenges connecting with their White colleagues through common workplace small talk, which often centered around topics such as skiing, private schooling, fine dining, and European travel. While participants who reported being from higher-income backgrounds or more familiar with White cultural norms expressed some increased ease in navigating these spaces, many still felt that full integration remained elusive. Participants reflected that, unlike their White counterparts—including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—racialized lawyers were less likely to benefit from automatic inclusion, as their racial identity continued to mark them as distinct, even when many other social markers aligned. As one participant said:

I think, ultimately, based on my experience, race matters more [than socio-economic status] because I've seen poor White kids make it just fine in this profession. They get by because as soon as they put a suit on, they look like everybody else.

Participants ($n=13$) also described experiences of role encapsulation. These experiences took the form of both status leveling ($n=4$), such as being mistaken for a non-lawyer or a more junior lawyer, and stereotyped role assignments ($n=12$), including being asked to participate in DEI initiatives, mentor only racialized associates or appear in promotional materials and client meetings to signal the firm's diversity. Notably, the experience of status-leveling was only reported by female participants. While many participants reported initially welcoming involvement in DEI-related initiatives, some later came to view this work as unrecognized and uncompensated labour that diverted time and energy from core legal responsibilities. Several participants

observed that by placing responsibility for improving diversity and inclusion within the firm on racialized lawyers, law firms reduced the burden of organizational change on White lawyers, who could presumably instead focus on their billable work. One participant explained:

I was very encouraged by the management of the firm to take part in diversity related initiatives...but it was draining trying to do all of that work while also billing as much as was needed or even just putting in as much face time as was needed.

Other participants expressed frustration at being expected to serve as representatives or educators on diversity issues without formal expertise or institutional support and at continuously being paired with other racialized lawyers when they volunteered for mentorship or recruitment initiatives. Participants also recounted being assigned to files or client meetings based on perceived racial alignment, often without meaningful involvement in the legal work itself, leading some to feel tokenized and devalued. One participant stated that these experiences made them feel like a “circus animal”. Cumulatively, these experiences reinforced the perception amongst many participants that their professional value was at times defined more by their racial identity than by their legal skills or contributions.

Several participants ($n=5$) described experiencing lower assumed competence in the workplace based on their race, consistent with status expectations. These participants reported feeling that they were not granted the same benefit of the doubt as their White colleagues regarding their abilities and, as a result, believed they needed to consistently exceed expectations to be seen as equally competent. They reflected on the need to deliver exceptional work to counteract lowered expectations and observed that racialized lawyers, particularly women, were held to a higher standard than White male colleagues. One participant shared: “[A]s a black woman, I do have to work twice as hard to get half as much. I have to be exceptional to be viewed as competent.” This disparity was perceived as both unfair and emotionally taxing, with some participants expressing frustration that mediocre work by White peers was often rewarded, while racialized lawyers had to “sweat” to receive comparable recognition.

Many participants ($n=12$) shared how explicit or implicit bias reflective of homophily preferences shaped their experiences in law firms, particularly by limiting their ability to form relationships with White colleagues and superiors. Participants reported that White lawyers, especially senior ones, appeared more comfortable working with and mentoring individuals who looked like them or shared similar cultural backgrounds, resulting in racialized lawyers being overlooked for work, guidance and career development opportunities. As one participant put it:

[P]artners often look out for people who look like them because they’re like, oh, that’s like the younger version of me. I wanna look out for this guy. It’s often a White male. That’s why there’s so many White male partners.

Some participants shared that they had to go out of their way to demonstrate shared interests or compatibility with their White colleagues to gain access to these relationships, which felt unfair. Others noted that even when formal mentorship programs exist, the resulting relationships are often not as lasting or impactful as those forged informally and more easily between White lawyers. Participants felt that these dynamics made it more difficult for them to access key forms of support—such as career advice, work referrals, and sponsorship for partnership—and contributed to feelings of professional isolation and exhaustion. Several participants also explained that the lack of mentorship and meaningful connection with colleagues negatively impacted their career trajectories and mental health, with some ultimately leaving their firms as a result.

Another dominant theme raised by participants ($n=15$) was the influence of White cultural norms within law firms and how these norms shape expectations of professionalism and compel some racialized lawyers ($n=14$) to engage in code-switching to succeed. These participants described altering their speech, behaviour, and appearance to conform to these unspoken norms, which they associated with a White, upper-middle-class ideal. This self-monitoring was viewed as necessary to avoid being misjudged, stereotyped, or excluded, despite no one explicitly instructing them to do so. Many reported presenting a “whitewashed”

version of themselves, perceiving that their authentic identities might hinder their career advancement. As one participant explained:

No one told me that I needed to whitewash myself. It was just [that based on] the impression that I had from fitting in at my school and from my entire life, I thought that this would be valued and required.

Participants described code-switching as emotionally taxing and a reflection of systemic pressures to assimilate in order to thrive within the legal profession. They reported that code-switching often resulted in feelings of inauthenticity, exhaustion, imposter syndrome and difficulty forming genuine workplace connections. For example, when asked about the cost of code-switching, one participant shared: “I would go home so tired and it wasn’t always because of work. It was because I had to put on this personality, this front, that became exhausting on its own.”

Several participants ($n=7$) also described how emotion norms within law firms are shaped by racialized expectations, particularly regarding assertiveness, expression of negative emotions, and discussions about diversity. While assertiveness is typically valued in legal practice, participants noted that when racialized lawyers displayed this trait, it was often misinterpreted as defiance or inappropriate anger. This double standard made it difficult for them to communicate authentically or respond to mistreatment without fear of backlash. Similarly, participants observed that White colleagues were afforded greater leeway to express negative emotions or dissatisfaction, while racialized lawyers felt compelled to suppress their feelings to avoid being perceived as unprofessional or threatening. This extended to conversations about diversity and inclusion issues, which participants felt could not be raised openly without risking defensiveness from their White colleagues. As a result, some racialized lawyers ($n=5$) engaged in significant emotion management to navigate these norms, describing this effort as psychologically exhausting and indicative of the unequal burdens placed on them in predominantly White law firms. As one participant explained: “If people say casually sexist things or casually racist things, then it’s up to you to just be quiet and not make a noise about it.”

Discussion

This study’s findings suggest that the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers in Canadian law firms is undermined by a range of organizational and interpersonal dynamics that intersect with race, including tokenism processes, status expectations, homophily preferences, and racialized norms of professionalism and emotion. Although this was a qualitative study and, therefore, did not seek to measure career wellbeing directly, the data provide insight into how these organizational processes may compromise each of the five pillars of career wellbeing. Given the well-established links between career wellbeing and important outcomes such as motivation, turnover intentions, and psychological health (e.g. Creed & Blume, 2013; King et al., 2010), the challenges described by participants raise significant concerns about the sustainability and equity of legal careers for racialized lawyers.

With respect to access to meaningful work and opportunities for career growth, participants described how being positioned as “diversity lawyers” and representatives of their racial group often transformed potentially meaningful DEI work into burdensome, undervalued labour. Role encapsulation and hypervisibility meant that diversity-related tasks and representational duties were added to already demanding workloads, without the recognition or developmental value associated with billable legal work. At the same time, lower assumed competence and heightened scrutiny based on race undermined trust in their abilities and limited access to complex files. Exclusion from informal networks—often organized around White, upper-middle-class cultural practices—further constrained opportunities for high-profile assignments and sponsorship. Many participants who found it difficult to access meaningful work and desired career growth opportunities expressed feeling stressed, unmotivated and unsupported – emotions that are associated with poor career wellbeing (Agrawal & Harter, 2009; Creed & Blume, 2013; Kidd, 2008).

The themes also illuminate how the formation of positive relationships with colleagues, and in particular with senior lawyers and clients, are shaped by race. Boundary heightening and homophily preferences reduced the frequency and quality of contact between racialized and White lawyers, making it

harder to build the kinds of informal, trusting relationships that typically underpin mentorship, sponsorship, and access to developmental work. Professionalism and emotion norms, experienced as implicitly White and gendered, often required racialized lawyers to engage in ongoing code-switching and emotion management to be seen as competent and non-threatening. Participants linked this self-monitoring to inauthenticity, isolation, and emotional exhaustion, echoing prior research on authenticity, social support and wellbeing at work (e.g., Cha et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2023; Sloan et al., 2013). Together, these dynamics help explain why many participants experienced limited social support and weaker attachment to their firms, despite formal diversity commitments.

Perceived organizational support was similarly shaped by racialized patterns of opportunity and recognition, which signalled to participants that they had to work harder than their White colleagues to be seen as equally competent and that advancement decisions might not be based on merit alone. Limited access to influential mentors and sponsors as well as isolation and exclusion driven by homophily preferences, status expectations, boundary heightening and the difficulties of forming authentic relationships under code-switching and emotion management expectations, further weakened their sense that their firm was invested in their long-term success. Some participants also believed that time spent on non-billable, diversity-related work and challenges accessing billable files negatively affected compensation and progression, aligning with broader evidence of racial pay gaps in the Canadian legal profession (Canadian Bar Association, 2020, 2021). While none of the participants suggested that they were formally ineligible for the same rewards and benefits as their White colleagues, efforts to manage their visibility led some to forgo certain supports, including mental health services offered by their firms. This self-limiting use of benefits further constrained the practical support available to them and subtly weakened perceptions that the organization was a reliable source of care. These patterns are consistent with research showing that perceived unfairness and lack of support from superiors undermine perceived organizational support and, in turn, career wellbeing (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Finally, the findings highlight constraints on autonomy, particularly self-endorsed functioning. Performance pressures linked to hypervisibility meant that some participants felt unable to change practice areas, reduce hours, or leave unsupportive firms without risking the reputation of their racial group or disappointing others who saw them as role models. Behavioural expectations grounded in emotion and professionalism norms also led several participants to feel that they could not present themselves authentically or challenge problematic behaviour by others without jeopardizing their careers. Their accounts support existing research demonstrating that, because racial code-switching continually reinforces White norms and culture as the standard for professionalism, both racialized and White professionals come to view such behaviours as an expected and often necessary pathway to advancement (McCluney et al., 2021). Consistent with the existing literature (e.g. Cha et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2013; Madera et al., 2012), participants associated these challenges with negative psychological consequences such as stress and feelings of inauthenticity, expressed discontent with their careers and uncertainty about or disinterest in continuing to work at a law firm or in the legal professional as a whole.

Implications and Recommendations

This study illustrates how the key organizational drivers of career wellbeing can be undermined for racialized lawyers within Canadian law firms, shedding light on why racialized lawyers tend to leave law firms at higher rates than their White counterparts. The results of this study also carry important implications for the individuals and institutions seeking to support the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers. For career development professionals, the results highlight the need to be equipped to recognize, affirm and address the structural and psychological realities that racialized lawyers face. Career support for these individuals should include helping them to engage in value-aligned career planning, articulate boundaries, assess cultural fit and navigate environments that may not be supportive of or aligned with their personal and professional identities. Positioning career conversations within an understanding of tokenism, bias, and racialized professionalism and emotion norms can enhance practitioners' ability to effectively prepare racialized lawyers for the complex interpersonal and institutional landscapes they may encounter within law firms.

For law firm management, this study underscores that the promotion of career wellbeing for racialized lawyers requires firms to examine and restructure how opportunity is distributed and potential is recognized. Instituting transparent work distribution systems, formalized sponsorship and equity-informed performance reviews can promote fairness. Treating DEI work as essential organizational labour and ensuring that it is institutionally resourced, equitably distributed and explicitly recognized in performance and promotion evaluations can help to ensure that racialized lawyers who choose to participate in these programs are not unintentionally disadvantaged for their contributions. Redefining leadership and competence to include diverse styles of communication and expression can help reduce some of the additional psychological burdens carried by racialized lawyers. Finally, given increasing backlash to DEI efforts in North America, law firms must prepare for resistance without retreating. Framing DEI efforts in terms of transparency, consistency, and organizational excellence can help build broader support. Ultimately, however, law firm leaders must be prepared to defend DEI as a core component of career wellbeing, talent retention, and institutional legitimacy. This means aligning DEI with the firm's long-term success and embedding it within every layer of organizational life.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study advances understanding of how racialized lawyers experience working within Canadian law firms, it is also subject to several limitations and highlights a number of directions for future research. First, its findings may have limited generalizability due to the small participant sample. Expanding the sample size would enhance generalizability and could also allow exploration into how race may interact with multiple other identities (e.g. gender, socio-economic status, age) to affect career wellbeing. Second as this study used a single-analyst design, findings represent an interpretive, situated reading of the data by the primary author. In RTA, theme development is understood as a creative and subjective process rather than a technical procedure aimed at coder agreement. Inter-rater reliability and consensus coding are not, therefore, epistemologically consistent with RTA and a single-analyst design is not considered problematic. At the same time, this design means that the themes reflect one possible account of participants' experiences.

Third, the study employed a largely deductive analytic orientation. This approach is a strength in that it enabled a focused, in-depth examination of how established constructs manifest in the careers of racialized lawyers and allowed the analysis to speak directly to existing theoretical debates. However, a deductive frame may also have constrained analytic openness and limited the visibility of patterns that did not fit easily within the chosen theoretical scaffolding. Although the analysis remained attentive to unanticipated insights, more inductive applications of RTA might surface different or additional themes.

Fourth, the interviews capture the perceptions of participants at one moment in time. As career wellbeing reflects an individual's satisfaction with their career over the long term, longitudinal research is needed to understand how racialized lawyers' perceptions of their careers evolve over time. Fifth, while the interview protocol was not specifically designed to elicit the recollection of negative experiences from participants, the way that the questions were phrased may have biased participants to sharing such experiences (and in fact, a small number of participants raised this issue to the primary researcher). It is, therefore, possible that the composition of the interview questions resulted in this study generating more examples of negative law firm experiences. Finally, the interviews were conducted prior to the most recent wave of political backlash against DEI initiatives. A follow-up study using the same participants would be helpful in understanding whether and how the new political environment within North America has shaped the experiences of racialized lawyers working in Canadian law firms.

Conclusion

This study offers a contextually rich and theoretically grounded account of how racialized lawyers experience their careers within Canadian law firms. The findings reveal how subtle, cumulative and culturally embedded forms of exclusion undermine core components of career wellbeing. These dynamics help explain ongoing patterns of attrition among racialized lawyers despite the growing numbers of racialized lawyers

entering the profession. This research also highlights the resilience, agency and vision of racialized lawyers who strive to align their work with their values and identities. Their stories illustrate that career wellbeing requires institutional accountability, cultural alignment, and relational safety.

Although the study was conducted during a period of heightened DEI attention and support, its findings remain especially relevant in the current climate of political and institutional reevaluation and rejection of DEI efforts. The data make clear that even when formal diversity policies and initiatives are in place, deep-rooted inequities often persist. This is, in part, because many such policies do not address the underlying dynamics that shape daily work experiences such as exclusion from informal networks, racialized emotion norms or assumptions about competence. While the current backlash to DEI makes it more difficult for firms to introduce or revise initiatives to address these experiences, this study shows that DEI policies alone are not the only path forward. Law firms can still foster cultures where openness, difference and critical discourse are welcomed and rewarded—where the conditions for psychological safety, belonging, and professional flourishing are built into everyday practice. These cultural shifts can go a long way to addressing the deeper drivers of exclusion and improving the career wellbeing and, consequently the retention, of racialized lawyers.

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