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Be Yourself

There may be **consequences**, but can you live as a **fraud**?

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I am an African-American female attending an Ivy League law school that is consistently ranked among the top five law schools in the nation. I also attended an Ivy League undergraduate school and hold a master's degree from a prestigious university.

While I have worn my hair in different styles, I usually find myself going back to braids, especially while I'm attending school. Because I have limited time (and money), I don't want to spend hours on my hair. I find braids to be much less time-consuming than other styles, far less expensive and they just seem to suit me better.

Now that I am about to do early interviews for law firm summer associate positions, I've received conflicting advice as to whether I should wear braids during my meetings. Some of my colleagues have advised that in light of my educational credentials, wearing braids really shouldn't matter. However, others are absolutely adamant

that wearing braids will hurt my chances for receiving an offer.

Which opinion is correct?

This is a tough one. I'm inclined to say no, don't wear braids. And, keep in mind, this advice is coming from a braid-loving sista! I can relate to the trauma of maintaining a hairstyle that requires ongoing care, weekly salon visits and a daily curling iron that, after all is said and done, leaves you with one strand of semi-viable hair.

Even after all of these post-Reconstruction years, hair is still a big deal among African-American women. Good hair, bad hair, kinky hair, nappy hair, wavy hair, straight hair, long hair, short hair, no hair—it can truly dictate our lives.

Many of us avoid swimming because water and processed hair simply do not get along. Add to that the number of women with limited workout schedules. Why? Unwanted perspiration has ruined



many a hairdo.

Not only does our relationship with hair impact our lifestyle decisions, but it can also influence our careers, particularly as attorneys at major New York law firms. So, quite frankly, both camps, the ayes and the nos, present legitimate positions that you ought

to consider, primarily based on how comfortable you are in your own skin.

Your academic achievements are quite impressive and would make anyone beam with pride. However, you're not the only law student who can flex. Keep in mind that your credentials only permit you to squeeze through the narrow crevice reserved for interviewees—which is a big step, but it doesn't close the deal. In order to get the offer you have to eradicate the "Shaneequa Factor."

The Shaneequa Factor is the product of our culture which, on several levels, has relegated the perception of African-American woman, irrespective of our

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academic, professional and/or economic achievements, to an obscenely narrow and mostly derogatory stereotype associated with shoplifting, ill-educated, baby mamas and the like. Whether you're Oprah attempting to make a purchase at Hermes or an Ivy League law student interviewing at a law firm, the Shaneequa Factor invariably seeps into the picture.

Add to the Shaneequa Factor the stark reality that even the most progressive of New York law firms are extremely conservative institutions, and you can quickly appreciate the relevancy of braids as it relates to your candidacy and career prospects.

For some candid feedback, I conducted a very informal survey of a wide range of attorneys in New York, including some partners and legal hiring professionals. Overwhelmingly, the consensus is that braids are acceptable provided they are neat and professional (translation: skip the beads and cowrie shells).

If you are going to wear individual braids, the front and back hairlines should be smooth and the braids placed in a bun or ponytail. (I prefer the bun—the ponytail strikes me as a bit too casual.) If you opt to wear cornrows, again, make sure the hairline is smooth and the cornrow size is unobtrusive: essentially, small and corporate in appearance.

You'll be encouraged to know that a number of respondents, including partners, felt that any firm that would deny an offer based on you wearing braids would not be a good fit anyway. They emphasized the importance of not overly compromising yourself, but also recognized that you definitely run the risk of an unfavorable response in the

form of a non-offer.

Apparently, they consider that this is a risk worth taking. But before you get too giddy, you should be aware that a significant number of white male partners and African-American female attorneys suggested that, if possible, you should try to avoid the braids. Their reasoning: Some individuals with hiring power are less enlightened, and the braids could be viewed in a negative light.

So hair's (get it?) what it boils down to. If wearing your hair in braids is an integral part of who you are, both in terms of style and functioning, then not wearing them during early interviews only delays your dilemma. How long are you willing to perpetrate a fraud?

However, if you have flexibility and don't mind a little compromise, then changing your hairstyle to reduce the influence of the nasty Shaneequa Factor is a strategic move. Whatever you decide to do, best of luck with your interviews!

I am a white male fourth-year associate at a New York law firm and I am gay. Since I was a summer associate at the firm, I've been fairly neutral about my sexuality—more like "I won't tell you and please don't ask me."

When I started at the firm I was not in a committed relationship. Now my partner and I live together and are seriously considering having children. I have been interviewing for lateral positions at other law firms and so far, I have two offers to consider. As I move forward to a new firm, I wonder if I should I be more obvious about the fact that I am gay, or stay the course of neutrality.

Neutrality sounds like a mild substitute

for intentional non-disclosure. It also seems like a horribly constrained way to live a life.

I think that you should be who you are in a complete sense and not walk this tightrope, where you are clearly exercising extreme caution about revealing your sexuality. You can't live like that—it's not fair to you and it's completely disingenuous.

Your sexuality is not an option, so when selecting your next firm be sensitive to whether the firm's environment is accepting of gay associates. You should speak naturally and openly about your partner during interview situations where it makes sense.

For example, it is extremely rare for an interview to be conducted without some reference to family, so you should use these opportunities to "reveal" your situation and test the firm's climate. I also would suggest that you ask specific questions regarding the firm's culture as it pertains to gay associates.

Listen, you are entitled to live an authentic life, particularly as you are planning to bring children into your relationship. At the very least, they deserve non-neutral acknowledgment without false pretenses and quite frankly, the same goes for you.

Find a law firm where this can happen. Anything less is completely and totally unacceptable. •

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