

## Ten Microaggressions in the workplace

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If we understand how being treated negatively because of race impacts on a person, we would know that being a victim of racism is not a life goal anyone desires.

On the last day of June, 2020, I was waiting at the self-checkout queue. I observed a staff member doing a great job, as she cleaned the counter after every customer. When it was my turn, I walked confidently to the counter she had just cleaned. I was stopped and directed towards a counter a young man had just left. I did a double take as it was obvious she had not cleaned that counter as part of the COVID 19 precautionary measures. For a split second, I was off balance. Then a myriad of thoughts flowed through my mind. When I called her out on it, she had no response.

The way to think about this microaggression is what was at the back of her mind. Did she think she didn't need to serve a Black person with a clean counter, was it that Black people can withstand dirt, she was too important to serve a Black person? Black people are too inferior for her to serve them? What?

Some people will immediately defend this person they have not seen and say it was a mistake. My answer to that is when the mistakes only happen when it gets to your turn, after a while you become suspicious. That's why these are microaggressions. You never fully know while at the same time you are sure you know.

Irrespective of how much you've pulled yourself up by your bootstraps (if you are fortunate enough to have boots), racism and microaggression does not see your doctorate degree, how much taxes you pay, or your contribution to society. It focuses on the inner held beliefs and stereotypes about a group and your membership of that group. When that prejudice is triggered at the point of contact, people perform racism. Which is acting out prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism against a person or people on the basis of their race and attributing their actions and outcome to their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group.

People who are Black are at a higher risk of experiencing microaggression due to race, even after they have moved up the economic ladder because their default racial positioning at the bottom of the racial ladder remains unchanged. A classic example is Oprah Winfrey's [racism row in the Swiss shop](#) incident, where despite the wealth and respect she has gained in the US, in a place where she was unknown she was just another Black woman whom the shopkeeper assumed could not afford a designer bag. The sales assistant refused to attend to Oprah. We know that ended with a public apology from the shop, but the damage had already been done.

Being a victim of microaggression can result in an inner dialogue and self-questioning; it has a psychological impact because you end up questioning if the experience was imagined or real, even when you know it is real. Because of the nature of microaggressions, Black people are often accused of being over-sensitive or imagining things whenever they mention issues of race. So much emotional energy is spent navigating workplace microaggressions (intended or unintended),

Just six weeks after the world witnessed the gruesome public killing of George Floyd, some enterprises have made big statements showing support for the Black lives matter, while some have not been able to make a substantial statement of commitment to eradicating and tackling

racism in the workplace. If we are to address racism in the workplace, we need to discuss racial microaggressions - something businesses rarely address.

Microaggressions can be defined as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.” It is referred to as micro to emphasise the focus on the individual dimension, that is the person- to- person interactions. Understanding microaggression can be problematic because they are commonplace. Irrespective of if they are deliberate or not, they cause harm. Three forms of microaggressions include: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation.

A “microassault is an explicit racial derogation characterised primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions.

A microinsult is characterised by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity. They represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of colour.

Microinvalidations are characterised by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour.

### **Some microaggression in the workplace**

1. Mispronunciation of a person’s name while at the same time able to pronounce names like Schwarzenegger... Why is this a microaggression? Asking if you can change or shorten their names to B, Jay, Jason because you cannot take the time to learn how to pronounce their name, suggests they are not important, you don’t care, and you can’t be bothered. Many people of migrant descent have come to accept that it is difficult for white people to pronounce their names and in trying to help their colleagues end up giving wrong pronunciations. People ask me now before a show, for the correct pronunciation of my name. Ask your colleague in the office. [Denise Chaila tells us her name is not Chele](#), Chelala, Chailie, Chia..., say my name she sings, sound it out. Let’s try.
2. “Where are you originally from”: this one Black people in Ireland hear so many times. We’ve talked about it and written about it but so many people still insist on asking that question. It is justified on the basis that it’s an ‘Irish thing’. When we’re asked, ‘Where are you from?’ and we answer “Cork, Dublin or Ballyer” our response can be met with confusion, as if the enquirer is looking for something else. It’s the interpretation of that ‘something else’ that causes the microaggression. Then when the Black person is uncomfortable with that line of questioning it gets explained away as simply “ what we do” in Ireland. This is a subtle way of demanding that people have to assimilate in order to be accepted. It is an exercise of privilege over the other. The image Ireland portrays of itself is, “We are not bullies in Ireland; we are not rude or insensitive.” Consistent insistence on that line of questioning or interaction says otherwise. Remember, your Black or migrant colleagues are not there for your entertainment or to be interrogated by you. So what should you do? If they say Cork, or Dublin, then carry on the conversation as you would with any Irish person. Otherwise, from the very beginning, ask the question and don’t try to couch it as a conversation. Ask them directly about their heritage. Conversations about ‘place’ can be interesting. Sometimes, I ask my students, “where

do you call home.” That becomes the conversation. They lead, they share as little or as much as they want to share and I am satisfied to go there with them.

3. Smelly food: This one is so disrespectful and annoying. Colleagues come into the canteen/restaurant during lunch time, and upon just seeing their Black or Asian colleagues by the microwave and already they twist their nose and say “What’s that smell?”, “Oh that smells”. Oftentimes, they don’t even bother to see that it’s a simple f\*\*\*ing salad. It suggests the superiority of one food culture over the other. Every food has a smell. Even “Irish” food.
  
4. “You speak English well.” A white person commenting about a person of colour’s ability to articulate themselves well is condescending and irritating. That show of surprise after a colleague has finished giving a presentation at work reveals inner held prejudices and stereotypes. It shows a belief that people who are of the descent of that colleague can’t speak English well. Everyone speaks with an accent, but the system of white supremacy has placed a higher value on “white” accents, prejudicing anyone who speaks with a non-White accent. Yet we know accents are not an indication of intelligence. Telling a person of colour that they speak English well is a racial microaggression. It is not praise, it is not a compliment. What should you do instead? Compliment your colleague on their knowledge of the topic and not on their ability to articulate the point. There’s a slight difference and the difference is the line between a microaggression which is an insult or slight and a compliment.
  
5. Silencing: This occurs when issues that concern that minority groups are not talked about, celebrated or taught in the workplace. Worse still, no one from the organisation attends even if there’s an event. There’s no budget to provide refreshments nor is the event announced via the organisation’s broadcast channel. Yet the organisation talks about and celebrates other groups. Many of us experienced this with the recent #BLM, where Black employees were wondering how long it would take for discussion of the killing of George Floyd to make it into the virtual team meeting, staff newsletter or statement from the employer. Six weeks after the tragic killing of George Floyd, many Black employees are still waiting for their colleagues to even say something, to acknowledge what is happening. Yet we talk about your dog when you say they are unwell, we talk about the wildfires in other countries, we talk about the sports teams you support when they win or lose. Black people are expected to lean in to white culture and superficial interests, but when it comes to literal life and death issues we don’t hear a peep from our white colleagues. Why?
  
6. Being overlooked: this happens when you attend meetings, are in class/lectures, participate in a discussion and your contribution is completely ignored. Black students who put up their hands first say they are completely ignored. Another common experience is after you finish speaking and everyone just glosses over what you have said, almost as if you do not exist. Then to your surprise, another white colleague restates what you said and the whole room suddenly begins to applaud them for such a wonderful suggestion. In your head, you are thinking, ‘I just said that’. The resulting frustration can stop people from participating in class or at meetings. This process of overlooking and ignoring denies a person’s voice, knowledge, expertise and presence. The negation of Black voices dehumanises and when it comes from people in positions

of authority it strengthens white supremacy. It models and teaches racism. For secondary school students, it discourages active participation and they witness inequality.

7. “Where is the manager?”: this happens when customers/visitors or new hires to the organisation show surprise, refuse to engage with, or ask for someone else, stressing they want to see the manager despite being told the Black staff member is the manager. It shows the prejudice that Blacks are not expected to be managers. That is obvious in our system where compared to other populations, only 4% of the Black population in Ireland are in management positions, according to the 2016 Census.
8. “How did you come to Ireland?” Only with people of colour does the means of travel become such a hot topic for white Irish. Honestly, why is it important? Do we ask you how your parents gave birth to you in Ireland? Strangely we rarely hear Irish people asking this question of people from Germany or Poland. This question feeds off racist tropes and the assumption that every person of colour must be an asylum seeker. This is often one of the first questions a person of colour will hear when in conversation in Ireland.. Irish people often ask deeply personal and invasive questions of people of colour, expecting us to forgo our privacy and dignity and with little thought to the consequences. It might be a difficult period and experience they don’t want to recount. They might not want to share their travel stories with a relative stranger. Maybe consider asking instead, why did you choose Ireland?
9. Having to ask for things that should be given to you and seeing them being given to others; seeing Blacks as dangerous and untrustworthy: The combination of both points can play out in the workplace through the policing of Black bodies. Some of my research subjects have reported not being given passwords or access to certain databases, not being allowed to be the last person in the office, not being trusted to work remotely while others are ‘trusted’ to. They find they have to ask for the things others are given. Black people are expected to “earn” access and trust to access systems the organisation already uses.
10. Racial microaggressions negatively impact on how people experience job satisfaction, self-esteem, mental and physical health. They are experienced as constant stings and barbs that feels like the constant drip, drip of a leaking tap. These microaggressions are also very difficult to report without sounding petty. But you can call it out if it happens to you or if you witness it. I want to end this article by asking you to take action and do an exercise of self-evaluation. I’m linking here some further reading and a suggested exercise on microaggressions,

<https://gim.uw.edu/sites/gim.uw.edu/files/fdp/Microaggressions%20File.pdf>

Joseph. E. 2018. Whiteness and racism: Examining the racial order in Ireland <https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603517737282>