

Defining Anti-Black Racial Microaggressions



Racism encompasses a complex set of beliefs in racial superiority and inferiority, enacted through individual behaviours and institutional practices,¹ leading to the devaluation and marginalization of Black people.²

Modern-day racism has shifted from overt acts to more subtle, implicit, and nuanced messages.

Anti-Black *microaggressions* are daily, sometimes unintentional slights towards Black people, and often involve a broad range of interactions.³ These **microaggressions can be experienced across five domains**, perpetuating systemic racism and harming Black youth, families, and communities.

Understanding the multifaceted nature of anti-Black microaggressions is essential for recognizing and addressing their pervasive impact.

Anti-Black Racial Microaggressions: Five Domains

01. INCIDENT DOMAIN

Incidents are verbal, behavioural, or environmental interactions with potential derogatory racial undertones.

● VERBAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Use of racial slurs or other derogatory language targeting Black people.

Example: “That’s so white” or “white-washed.”

● BEHAVIOURAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Blatant gestures or behavioural acts of anti-Black racism.

Example: monkey gestures.

“I have constantly been racially profiled and treated differently due to the fact that I’m Black. I’ve had staff follow me around in stores I’ve frequented, been refused entry into a store’s washroom – even though a lighter, white-passing friend of mine was granted access minutes earlier – and I’ve been told or shown by men that they don’t date Black women or women my complexion or darker.”

Statements that reinforce limiting stereotypes of Black people.

Example: “I’m Black. A store owner asked if I wanted to be a basketball, football player or a rap star. He was shocked when I said programming.”



ENVIRONMENTAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Example: Educational curricula ignore Black history and culture.

“So the curriculum is Eurocentric, so just being made to feel like I didn’t exist. I remember when I was in school, and I didn’t exist at all in terms of, like, you know, Blackness didn’t exist. And it was only when I was in biology that I actually saw myself because they can’t deny that I have a body, that I have a reproductive system.”

Example: The hypervisibility vs. invisibility of Black youth, through which Black youth are both hyper-focused upon for anticipated or perceived wrongdoings and have their humanity and culture ignored within governing systems, including education.

“I went to an optician appointment once and my doctor, someone who I had been seeing for the past six years, started to verbally berate me for sitting in the front office. He confused me for another Black patient he had just seen minutes ago and was confused why I was still there. This made me realize that many professionals within health care view their patients as numbers. I haven’t returned to his office.”

“I had to have courageous conversations with the administration about, let’s say hello to our youth when they’re walking into the building. Before we start to say, well, you know, pull your socks out of your pants, pull your pants up, take your durag off, things like that.”

02. PERCEPTION DOMAIN

Personal beliefs about whether an incident, often based on an assumption, was racially motivated; the person experiencing the microaggression is left questioning the perpetrator’s intentions, which is energy-depleting and demoralizing.

👁️ ASSUMPTION-BASED MICROAGGRESSIONS

Example: The ‘Angry Black Woman’ stereotype, which associates Black women with anger or aggression.

“The Black females in particular, one of their big concerns was, ‘I’m tired of being told I’m angry like I’m... an angry person.’”

03. REACTION DOMAIN

Reactions can be experienced cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally, and go beyond the capacity of the person experiencing the microaggression to label an incident as racist in the moment. Reactions can trigger an internal struggle, manifest as a sense of paranoia, before or after an incident, or even a ‘sanity check’ – consulting Black friends, family members, and coworkers to ‘check’ their perceptions of incidents as racism.

BEHAVIOURAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Example: Dismissiveness towards Black people's experiences with racism, leading to feelings of invalidation and doubt.

"When I would try to address instances of sexism or passive-aggressive remarks related to my race, I would be told not to make everything about gender and race."

Example: Silencing Black staff who speak out against racism, leading to their emotional exhaustion and suppression of expression.

"So just you know, being just silenced, trying to pretend to silence me and micromanaging me and just trying to like, just get rid of me and pushing me out and making it seem as though I am, I'm the one that's the problem. Like I'm the troublemaker..."

04. INTERPRETATION DOMAIN

Interpretations are the meanings the person experiencing the microaggression makes of an incident, which could include why they think the microaggression occurred, its significance, the intentions of the aggressor, and any related social patterns.

MICROAGGRESSIONS RELATING TO A PATTERN

Example: A Black employee notices a pattern of subtle bias in their workplace; the cumulative impacts of that bias highlight the pervasive nature of systemic racism within organizational structures and the lack of support available to Black staff at work.

"I have had many experiences in my previous job where my concerns around anti-Black racism were not taken seriously. My direct supervisor would often gaslight me and even filed a complaint against me when I spoke up about discrimination and bullying. That, coupled with bad experiences with police, general anti-Blackness, and consistent racist events in the news, is often overwhelming."

05. CONSEQUENCE DOMAIN

Consequences refer to the psychological effects of microaggressions on recipients – how incidents affect their behavioural patterns, coping strategies, cognitive reasoning, psychological wellbeing, and worldview. The toll of experiencing racial microaggressions on the mental health of Black youth is profound, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

BEHAVIOURAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Example: Societal resistance to addressing anti-Black racism, questioning its necessity, and minimizing its significance and continued impact on Black people.

“It’s like, okay, we’re living in 2023. Like, we’re not living in slavery times. Why are you guys still talking about this, this is not still an issue, and I always say, ‘How are you going to tell me it’s not an issue? Live one day in my skin and tell me you’re not experiencing something more than even the smallest thing.’”

Example: Internalized racism manifesting in harmful actions and distorted self-perception among Black youth, perpetuating the psychological effects of racism.

“I once cried at work because my own bosses told me I was only there because I was a diversity hire.”

“I’ve also heard from parents is that experience of anti-Black racism in children and their attempts to change their skin colour, taking an eraser to try to get rid of their Black skin, a young girl drinking bleach.”

Example: Developing coping strategies focused on self-care and preserving wellbeing for Black people to maintain roles and responsibilities in professional, educational, personal, and familial contexts.

“This is why a couple years ago, I was like, I’m just gonna start doing what fills my soul because no one is looking out for me in these spaces. And like if I don’t look out for myself, then I can’t be like, who I need to be at home for myself or my kids, for my partner, that type of thing.”

This Factsheet was developed by YouthREX Research Assistant Hajar Seiyad from “Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans” by Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M. B. Holder, published in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (2008).

ENDNOTES

1. Jones, J. M. (1997). *Prejudice and racism*. McGraw-Hill.
2. Sue, D. W. (2003). *Overcoming our racism: The journey to liberation*. Jossey-Bass.
3. Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*, 271–286.
4. Quotes of examples of microaggressions are from Black youth research participants in [YouthREX’s Ontario Youth Sector Compass research project](#).