

Harmful Assumptions and Stereotypes of Black Youth



Anti-Black racism manifests in the lives of Black youth in numerous ways, including through the enactment and reproduction of harmful assumptions and stereotypes, often experienced as gendered racial microaggressions — subtle forms of discrimination in brief, everyday exchanges that are based on the intersection of gendered and racial identities.

To make spaces safe for Black youth, we must understand these microaggressions and challenge the underlying assumptions and stereotypes, which can compromise Black youth mental health, wellbeing, sense of identity and possibility, and potential outcomes.

Harmful Assumptions and Stereotypes of Black Girls & Young Women

Developed from *Devalued, Overdisciplined, and Stereotyped: An Exploration of Gendered Racial Microaggressions Among Black and Adolescent Girls* (2022) by Cecile A. Gadson and Jioni A. Lewis in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*.

ASSUMPTIONS OF...



01. BEAUTY & EXOTICISM

Black girls and young women are subject to comments and judgements about their physical appearances and may be seen as ‘exotic’ when questioned about the nature of their hair and beauty routines. Beauty and hair care products designed for Black and racialized people may be kept in locked cabinets or not even put on display, and non-Black peers may suggest that Black “skin is too dark and not made for cosmetic products” (p. 19). But if the way that Black girls present themselves is outside “the stereotypical ‘done’ hair, dark brown eyes, large breasts, large buttocks, and curvaceous bodies, they receive questions about being biracial or mixed from white peers” (p. 18).

These everyday experiences result in feelings of being on display and can even lead to being “examined and physically touched” (p. 19). Black girls and young women are often stereotyped as representing the opposite of white femininity and beauty, which leads to a devaluation of their aesthetics; experiences of Black hair being touched routinely, and without consent, represents the ways that the personal space of Black girls and young women is often violated. Such microaggressions send the message that Black girls and young women are available for objectification.





02. VALUE

Objectification results in the devaluation of Black girls and young women; they are reduced to objects not only by assumptions of beauty and exoticism (and the ways that white peers try to minimize the impacts of negative comments with the excuse that they are harmless jokes), but also as romantic partners. Black girls and young women may be made to feel inferior and undesirable if they do not fit into certain ideals of femininity.

Although objectification can result in hypervisibility and feelings of being surveilled or policed, Black girls and young women can also be made to feel invisible, overlooked, and outnumbered. Feeling unseen, for example, could be the result of school administrators dismissing incidents of harassment, discrediting, and vulnerability, or white teachers addressing a Black student as ‘girl’ rather than by her name. Such microaggressions can result in Black girls and young women feeling unworthy of the same treatment as their white peers. These microaggressions experienced when young are parallel to the ways in which Black women are silenced but often called on to give a ‘Black perspective’ in professional settings.



03. INTELLIGENCE & BEHAVIOUR

Assumptions that Black girls and young women are intellectually inferior may result in expressions of surprise when they do not conform to these expectations. Black girls are assumed to communicate in loud and disruptive ways, but are silenced when trying to contribute to discussions, and experience receiving nonverbal messages to be quiet when attempting to share important insights – a gendered racial microaggression that involves silencing and marginalization.

Within the education system, Black girls experience stricter rules and harsher disciplinary policies, with reports of teachers and staff “disproportionately targeting them and enforcing dress code policies” (p. 20). In addition to rules, the hypervisibility of Black girls relates to the perceptions teachers hold of Black girls as ‘troublemakers’ and perpetuates the more extreme consequences that Black girls receive for the same actions as their white peers.

STEREOTYPES OF...



01. ANGRY BLACK GIRL

Black girls and young women are assumed to be angry and aggressive in both actions and tone of voice, and in their nonverbal behaviours. This stereotype also includes dangerous messages that Black girls should know how to fight and be willing to fight, as well as the assumption that Black girls are always the aggressor. This stereotype perpetuates the perception that Black girls are less feminine and docile than their white peers.





02. GHETTO BLACK GIRL

This stereotype involves assumptions of criminality and lower-class status that are rooted in the denigration of gender, race, and social class, and can extend to “stereotypical assumptions that Black girls [will] end up as single mothers” (p. 21) – the archetype of the ‘Welfare Queen’, conveying a message to Black girls and young women that they must be surveilled and conform to expectations.



03. JEZEBEL

Black girls and young women may be perceived to be promiscuous and hypersexual, including “experiences of receiving sexualized messages as well as threats when they declined sexual advances” (p. 21). Labels such as ‘side chick’ and catcalls from boys and young men requesting favours and referring to their bodies in degrading ways may be everyday experiences of gendered racial microaggressions and a form of sexual objectification that communicates the message that Black girls’ bodies are a commodity and are not respected in the same ways as their white peers.

Harmful Assumptions and Stereotypes of Black Boys & Young Men

Developed from Students ‘At Risk’: Stereotypes and The Schooling of Black Boys (2012) by Carl E. James in *Urban Education*.



01. IMMIGRANT

Racialized youth are routinely stereotyped as foreigners – as not belonging to Canadian culture – regardless of their immigration status; this informs educators’ assumptions that poor educational outcomes and “disciplinary problems” are a result of young people’s “foreign cultures” and their presumed inability, or unwillingness, to assimilate (p. 472). These stereotypes, combined with a lack of representation in the curriculum, create a sense that these youth are visitors and that they do not belong.



02. FATHERLESS

Due to the ways that systemic discrimination shapes the lives of Black families, Black children are significantly more likely to grow up in single-parent households – commonly perceived as “problem families” (p. 474) in which boys fail to develop the skills and discipline they need to succeed in school. Evidence suggests, however, that Black parents view education as a path to success, and that Black mothers are most often involved in their children’s socialization and school activities.



03. ATHLETE

In many schools, Black boys are recruited into sports based on the myth that Black men are “natural athletes” (p. 478). Although this is often understood to be a *positive stereotype*, this perception can shift young people’s attention from educational and career pursuits and limit their sense of what is possible. While a few may succeed in becoming athletes, many will not achieve this goal and find themselves with fewer alternatives.





04. TROUBLEMAKER

When Black boys are seen as immigrants, fatherless, and athletes, they are also perceived as lacking critical resources for educational success, such as social support and cultural capital. For students who live in stigmatized urban communities, these stereotypes are heightened in a “racialized moral panic” (p. 482) that contributes to hostile and heavily surveilled school environments; these, in turn, facilitate the school-to-prison pipeline.



05. UNDERACHIEVER

The dominant use of test scores to measure students’ skills and knowledge stigmatizes schools in underserved communities and reinforces stereotypes. Rather than focusing on the ways that schools are failing to meet the needs of Black youth, educators often attribute poor outcomes to the failures of students or their parents, who are seen as not being committed to their children’s education.

Challenging Harmful Assumptions & Stereotypes and Confronting Anti-Black Microaggressions



Responding to anti-Black racism requires ongoing reflection, learning, and unlearning — and connecting our understandings to *action* in our individual practices and organizational policies.

[The Kit for Centering Black Youth Wellbeing](#) supports anti-Black racism learning, action, and community engagement in Ontario’s youth sector.

[The Call-In-Cards for Anti-Black Racism Action](#) centre [critical self-reflexivity](#) as the source and impetus to connect understandings of anti-Black racism to anti-Black racism action – at the individual, program, and community levels. The Call-In-Cards are four decks of 16 cards across four themes. Each of the 16 cards features a scenario on one side and four prompts on the other to guide critical self-reflexivity and encourage critical conversations that lead to action.

In addition to the deck of Call-In-Cards, each of the four themes – Black Youth Voice, Black Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, Intersectional Identities, and Allyship – includes videos featuring Black practitioners, leaders, organizers, and activists, as well as **practical and interactive resources** to reinforce your anti-racism efforts, foster sustained impacts, and lead to transformational change.

[Learn more](#) to support your work to challenge harmful assumptions and stereotypes and to [confront anti-Black microaggressions](#) in your work with Black youth, families, and communities.