

Subtle racial slights at work cause job dissatisfaction, burnout for Black employees

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Black employees face a host of subtle verbal, behavioral and environmental slights related to their physical appearance, work ethic, integrity and more, causing job dissatisfaction and burnout, according to a new study from Rice University.

"When Thriving Requires Effortful Surviving: Delineating the Manifestations and Resource Expenditure Outcomes of Microaggressions for Black Employees" will appear in an upcoming edition of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. The research team—Rice's Danielle King, an assistant professor of psychological sciences, and Elisa Fattoracci, a graduate student in psychological sciences; David Hollingsworth, a clinical psychologist at Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Alabama; and former Rice undergraduates Elliot Stahr, now at Stanford University Law School, and Melinda Nelson—drew on data from 345 Black employees, who described their experiences in the workplace.

Although research on microaggressions (defined as commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental slights) has gained popularity in recent years, King said work that specifically focuses on anti-Black microaggressions—especially in the workplace—is still limited.

"This lack of knowledge is a real problem," King said. "Discrimination encountered in the workplace is more complicated and difficult to manage than in other scenarios. Outside of work, an individual can remove themselves from a setting or say something, but at work, the same individual may be afraid to speak up because of fear of retaliation, loss of a job, etc."

King and Fattoracci documented three common types of workplace microaggressions toward Black employees. The first was expression of anti-Black stereotypes, including negative assumptions related to intelligence, social skills or criminal behavior. One of the survey respondents recalled when she was falsely accused of theft.

"I work in a large office and it so happened that one day an envelope holding a fair amount of money was missing," she responded. "The boss called me in private and requested that I confess to the crime and he

would not make it public. I denied (taking) the money but everyone didn't believe me. I felt bad and cried (on) the drive home. The money was later found, it happened that the envelope was missing, he forgot it in his car and thought he filed it. He never apologized."

The second common microaggression was racialized role assignment—in other words, assuming that a person's racial identity made them automatically suited for a particular job or role, including roles that were subservient or physically oriented. King said this microaggression can also include assuming a co-worker is socioeconomically inferior.

"(I) was being mistaken for a football player by some administrative assistant," a Black man working in the Midwest reported. "I felt upset because the commentary suggested that Black men, especially of my size, are on college campuses for athletics and nothing more. I simply told her that I am not a football player and that I'm also not a student, but a professional that works here and that not all Black males on campus play sports."

The last type of workplace microaggression researchers documented was interactional injustice, in which Black employees are subjected to more negative interpersonal treatment than white employees. Examples include treating people as second-class citizens; ignoring individual differences or expressing contempt for unique practices of a racial group; and treating physical characteristics as abnormal or unhealthy by drawing attention to them.

"I have had multiple people communicate their concern about the professionalism of my hair, (including a) senior administrator (and) peer," a Black woman said of her experience. "I felt like a fool. It surprised me because I did not realize that was the general perception."

The researchers found Black employees who faced these

microaggressions experienced significantly higher levels of [job dissatisfaction](#) and burnout, largely because those employees felt they had to mentally prepare themselves for expressions of racism and discuss their feelings and problems with co-workers to help them make sense of and cope with these experiences.

"Given the harmful effects of [microaggressions](#), it's imperative for organizations to address these insidious forms of discrimination," Fattoracci said.

The team hopes its work will encourage further research on the topic and lead to practical interventions.

More information: Danielle D. King et al, When thriving requires effortful surviving: Delineating manifestations and resource expenditure outcomes of microaggressions for Black employees., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001016](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001016)

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