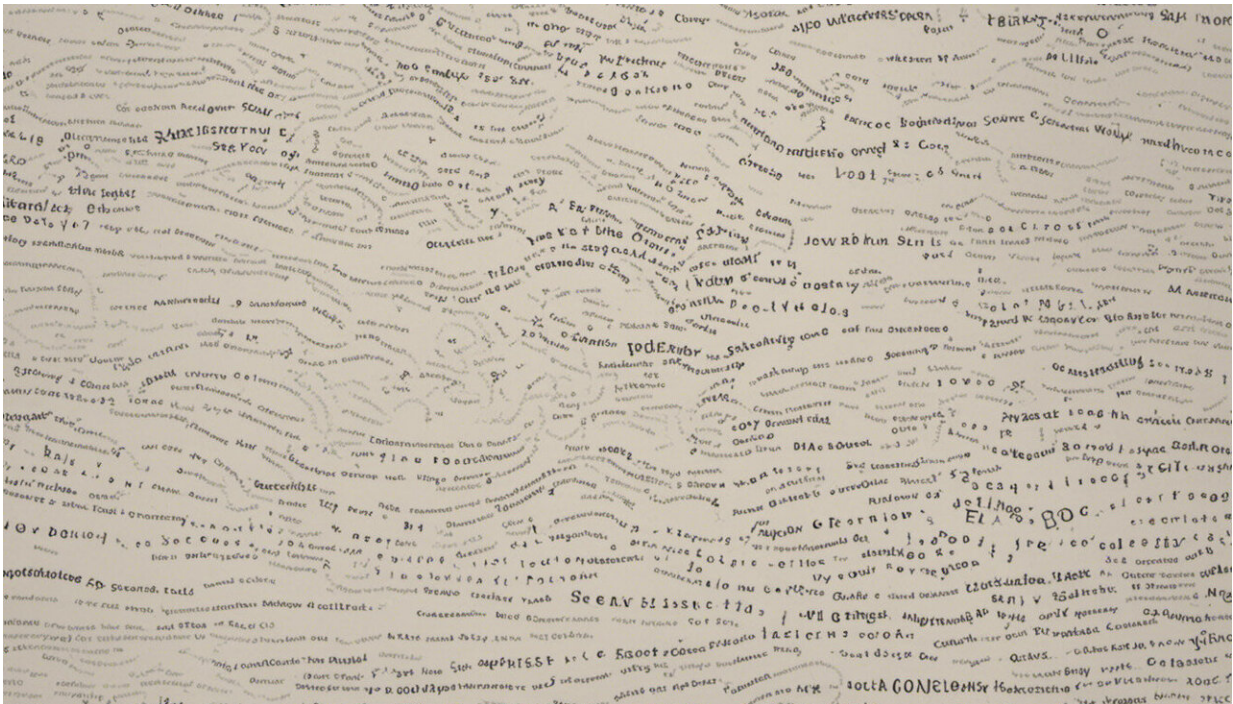# What is a 'name microaggression?' And could you be doing it without knowing?

December 16 2022, by Sender Dovchin

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In our recent study of 150 non-English speaking background migrants and refugees living in Australia, nearly 80% revealed using their birth names in their CVs led to fewer call-backs or no response at all.

This highlights language-based discrimination, and is an example of

"name microaggressions"—negative assumptions based on ethnic-sounding names.

Our participants said experiencing microaggressions against their [birth](#) names has taken a heavy psychological toll on them.

What is name microaggression?

Name microaggression refers to a stigma based on negative assumptions associated with migrants and refugees, purely based on their ethnic-sounding birth names. Research has found more ethnic-sounding birth names can cause unfounded negative beliefs about the person, such as being less skilled or less capable than someone with a more Anglo-sounding name.

Name microaggressions can present as names being mispronounced, misspelled, misunderstood, misgendered, or mocked. A common occurrence is for some people choosing to use a more "English-friendly" variation of a migrant's name [instead](#) of the person's birth name if it's not easy to say, spell or remember. This microaggression is an act of symbolic violence that is not always intentional, but is still hurtful and disrespectful.

Our participants talked about why name microaggressions are so hurtful, describing how their birth name carries crucial cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and family significance. Many participants suffered and continue to suffer from [psychological distress](#) and [negative emotions](#) such as embarrassment, self-shaming, fear, anxiety, and nervousness when they hear their names mispronounced.

Name microaggressions are often barriers to employment

Our interview data found newly arrived migrants and refugees who use their birth names seem to be the most vulnerable. Because their birth name sounds different, looks odd or is hard to pronounce, their skills and qualifications are discounted or rejected in institutional contexts such as [recruitment and employment](#).

Name microaggression is primarily found in the [initial hiring process](#) of recruitment when a candidate's CV is examined before they decide whether to go ahead with an interview.

As a result, most migrants in the study claimed to have adopted a "[CV whitening](#)" strategy by using an [alternative English name](#).

For example, one research participant, Oksana (pseudonym) from Ukraine, has altered her birth name by removing her heavily "post-Soviet sounding/looking" last name "Пугачева" (Pugacheva) to give a more Western feel. Instead she uses "Pugachev" in order to sound more Western.

Name microaggressions are not limited to job recruitment. We found most of our participants adopted "renaming practices" in every day life. This involves choosing new Anglo-sounding names instead of correcting their teachers, peers, friends, and colleagues when their names are mispronounced.

Some Chinese participants replaced their names with English names during their adolescent years while taking English classes in China.

As a result, many Chinese students offer [alternative Australian-sounding names](#)—Andy instead of Wang, Grace instead of Qian.

The wider (whiter) community needs to do better

The first step in maintaining an inclusive multicultural society is to start respecting migrants' birth names. Names are identities and histories. Names not only specify and individualize their bearers but also serve as means of empowerment and belonging. This sense of belonging connects them to their respective cultures, and the correct usage of birth names can bring a feeling of belonging in society.

When educators, policymakers, or employers practice name microaggressions, they convey a message that people's racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds don't matter.

Most employers in Australia explicitly declare their commitment to diversity. But our research shows they still engage in these microaggressions against migrants. Someone's birth name may not seem like a big deal, but it shows a significant expression of ignorance.

Workplaces, schools, colleges and universities need to improve their efforts to build an inclusive environment that accepts diverse names originating from many different languages.

Social justice, diversity and inclusion all start here.

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