

14 Things People Think are Fine to Say at Work (but are actually racist, sexist, or offensive)

By [Rachel Premack](#)

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Microaggressions are unconscious expressions of racism or sexism. They come out in seemingly innocuous comments by people who might be well-intentioned. From telling a new female worker that she “looks like a student” to asking a black colleague about her natural hair, microaggressions often exist in the workplace, too. And they can make a workplace feel unsafe and [toxic](#).

“Because microaggressions are often communicated through language, it is very important to pay attention to how we talk, especially in the workplace and other social institutions like classrooms, courtrooms, and so on,” [Christine Mallinson](#), professor of language, literacy, and culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, told *Business Insider*. Because microaggressions are so subtle, it’s often hard to know if you’re committing one or if you’re on the receiving end.

“One thing is that they are in a sense ambiguous, so that the recipient is apt to feel vaguely insulted, but since the words look and sound complimentary, on the surface (they’re most often positive), she can’t rightly feel insulted and doesn’t know how to respond,” Robin Lakoff, Professor Emerita of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, told *Business Insider*. Here are some of the most common microaggressions:

‘You’re so articulate’

“When a white colleague tells a colleague of color ‘You’re so articulate’ or ‘You speak so well,’ the remark suggests that they assumed the person in question would be less articulate — and are surprised to find out they aren’t,” Mallinson told *Business Insider*. Commenting on a black person’s language or speaking habits has a [complicated history](#), and this is a problem that African-Americans especially encounter in the workplace or school. “We (a white-dominant society) expect black folks to be less competent,” wrote A. Gordon in [The Root](#). “And, speaking as a white person, when we register surprise at a black individual’s articulateness, we also send the not-so-subtle message that that person is part of a group that we don’t expect to see sitting at the table, taking on a leadership role.”

What to say instead: Nothing. You can commend people on their specific ideas or insights, but commenting on how people speak is unnecessary.

‘You’re transgender? Wow, you don’t look like it at all’

Telling a transgender person that they don’t “look trans” might appear to be a compliment. But trans people like Elliot Wake know that while these people have good intentions, it’s an offensive comment that implies being trans isn’t desirable. “(T)hey assume if I’m trans, my ultimate goal must be to look as much like a binary [cis](#) male as possible — and that trans masculine folk who don’t look like cis men have somehow failed that unstated goal,” Wake told [Bustle](#). It indicates that the speaker feels looking as close as possible to [cisgender](#) (those who identify with the gender they were born with) should be what trans people aim for.

“Trans women can be beautiful in our own way without being judged on ridiculous cis beauty standards,” Katelyn Burns told [Bustle](#). What to do instead: Say nothing.

‘Oh, sorry, wrong person’

If you’re an underrepresented minority, and there’s one other person of your identity in the room, there’s a chance that the majority group will confuse your names. “When I started grad school, the intro class was taught by two

white women and I was one of two Mexican-Americans in the cohort,” [one BuzzFeed reader shared](#). “They constantly called me Maria, the other girl’s name. My name is Alejandra, and we look nothing alike.”

What to say instead: Learn your coworkers’ names. It’s a pretty basic concept

‘Oh, you’re gay? You should meet my friend Ann. She’s gay, too!’

[Adi Barreto wrote for *The Muse*](#) about a few issues she’s faced in the workplace as a queer woman in tech. One of the things she’s encountered: [that classic suggestion](#) that many well-intentioned straight people pull out for LGBTQ friends and family — offering to set them up with another LGBTQ person they know. “Just because two people you know have one thing in common, doesn’t mean they’d be a match,” Barreto wrote. “Yes, there are fewer people we can date, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have standards in personality type, values, and everything else you care about, too.”

Barreto added that this would be like setting up a straight coworker with a random straight person you know of the opposite gender — just because they happen to both have the same sexual orientation.

What to do instead: Say nothing. If your coworker of any sexual orientation wants your help meeting new people, they’ll ask you.

‘My boss is crazy’

Calling your female boss “crazy” or “hysterical” has sexist undertones, because these words have a long, problematic history. “In the past, especially in 19th century Europe, women who had anxiety or who were seen as troublemakers were often diagnosed as being ‘hysterical,’” Mallinson told *Business Insider*. “The word ‘hysterical’ comes from the Greek word hystera, meaning uterus, signifying that the so-called disease was specific to women.”

So, when you call a woman “crazy,” it suggests that her concerns or actions are illogical, rather than the result of critical thinking. What to say instead: Try to understand your colleague’s viewpoint rather than ascribing her actions as illogical. If you still don’t agree, you could say: “I don’t understand her perspective on this” — then ask her for her insights.

‘Where are you actually from?’

Asking someone about their ethnic heritage appears to just be a way to get to know someone. But for Latinos, Asians, and “people who fall in between the black-white racial binary in the United States,” the question gets tiresome, wrote journalist [Tanzina Vega in CNN](#).

“The next time you want to inquire about someone’s race, ethnicity or national origin, ask yourself: Why do I want to know?” Vega wrote. “Or better yet, rather than asking anyone ‘where are you really from?’ try listening — or letting that person ask you a question — instead.”

Receiving that question again and again can imply that a person isn’t really American or doesn’t truly belong in their country, just because of their appearance. “The wrong here is that the question presupposes that being a person of color is inconsistent with being American,” Dr. Ashley Lauren Pennington told *Business Insider*.

What to say instead: Nothing. If the person in question wants to discuss their identity, they can bring it up at their own discretion.

‘The way you’ve overcome your disability is so inspiring’

“Too often do we forget that people with disabilities, too, have to deal with microaggressions on the regular,” wrote [Wendy Lu](#), who has a tracheostomy tube, on *Bustle*. “They can take place in everyday conversations, making them hard to call out unless you want to be looked down upon for making a big deal out of ‘nothing.’”

If you have a coworker who has a disability, avoid tropes like telling them their disability is “[inspiring](#),” or tip-toeing around it by referring to their disability to a “special need.”

“I want to live in a world where we don’t have such low expectations of disabled people that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own names in the morning,” comedian and activist Stella Young said at [TEDxSydney](#). In other words, you shouldn’t be shocked when your coworker with a disability is able to accomplish just as much as their able-bodied peers.

What to do instead: Say nothing.

‘Your name is so hard to pronounce’

“The remark suggests that the person in question does not fit in culturally or linguistically, and that their identity is not worth taking time to learn about,” Mallinson told *Business Insider*.

What to say instead: If you can’t pronounce a colleague’s name, just ask them how to say it. Don’t point out that it’s foreign or unfamiliar to you.

‘I think you’re in the wrong room — this is the programmers’ meeting’

Kieran Snyder, now CEO of Textio, [told Fast Company](#) about one of her first experiences with microaggressions as a Microsoft employee. She was going to a company lecture on math. “I walked over a few minutes early, and in the room two men were already seated,” Snyder said. According to Snyder, one of the men saw her and quickly asked if she was looking for a talk on design that was being held nearby. He assumed that, as a woman, Snyder would not be interested or able to go to a math talk. It appears to just be a helpful suggestion, but it communicates that it’s impossible or unlikely that a woman couldn’t be an engineer.

What to say instead: Don’t assume people don’t belong or make them feel as if they’re outsiders.

‘Do you even know what Snapchat is?’

Those who believe that only those in their 20s and 30s could possibly know about memes and Twitter are [stereotyping older people](#). And while joking about your gray-haired colleague’s texting habits seems innocent, age discrimination is a serious problem in many workplaces. In tech, for instance, older professionals said they [have problems getting hired](#) despite a litany of past experience. These sort of innocent comments can lead to, say, older workers not getting new training opportunities, being left out of the workplace social circle, and other signs of [illegal age discrimination](#).

What to do instead: Once again, say nothing.

‘Are you an intern? You look so young!’

“By complementing a woman on her appearance, in a professional setting, you are reinforcing sexist beliefs about women’s worth — that first and foremost, women must be attractive, and this is a primary function of their social role,” Pennington told *Business Insider*.

“When an older male colleague tells a junior female colleague ‘You look so young’ or ‘You look like a student,’ the comment focuses attention on her appearance rather than on her credentials, and it may subtly undermine her authority on the job,” Mallinson told *Business Insider*. Remarking on someone’s apparent youth also implies that they seem inexperienced or potentially unqualified for their job.

What to say instead: Nothing. There's no reason to comment on a coworker's appearance. If you genuinely want to know their job title, look it up in a company directory.

'Is that your real hair?'

Receiving comments about one's natural hair is a frequent struggle for African-American women in particular. Black women's textured hair is often seen as "[less professional](#)" than smooth hair, according to the Perception Institute.

"My cubicle partner is black and has natural hair," an anonymous reader [wrote to BuzzFeed](#). "She has a pretty big afro, and at least once a week someone asks me if I think her hair is unprofessional, if it violates the dress code, or if it distracts me. No, Kathy. Her hair does not make me feel anything. You, however, leaving your desk and interrupting my work to try and start s--t makes me feel things."

For black women, the bias against natural hair results in [higher levels of anxiety](#) about their appearance. One in five black women feels socially pressured to straighten her hair for work, which is twice the rate for white women.

What to say instead: Nothing. A person's natural hair, regardless of their ethnicity, should be accepted as professional and workplace-friendly.

(Interrupting) 'Well, actually, I think...'

Men are [nearly three times as likely](#) to interrupt a woman than another man. *The New York Times* called men interrupting women "[a universal phenomenon](#)." And the kicker is when a man parrots the same idea as the woman he interrupted, receiving all the credit for it.

"I can't even count the number of times I've witnessed a woman being interrupted and talked over by a man, only to hear him later repeat the same ideas she was trying to put forward," Grace Ellis told [the Times](#). "I'd say I see this happen ... two to three times a week? At least?"

Elizabeth Ames, senior vice president of marketing, alliances, and programs for the Anita Borg Institute, also said this is one of the biggest workplace microaggressions she hears about. "Another thing we hear a lot is when they share an idea or comment and everyone ignores it, then the male in the room says it and everyone thinks it's the greatest thing," Ames [told Fast Company](#).

What to do instead: Wait for the person to finish their thought. And if you like their idea, give them credit.

'Why do you wear that?'

Those who are Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, or another religion and choose to wear religious head coverings might get overly-probing questions at work. In reality, that one person isn't a representative of their entire religion. If you want to learn more about that religion, you shouldn't ask people while they're just trying to do their job. [Muslim women](#) who wear a hijab, for instance, [often say](#) that people ask them "if they're bald underneath" or if someone is "forcing" them to wear a hijab. "Don't stare. Don't judge. Teach others. Know that I'm not somebody to be saved," wrote an anonymous hijab-wearing woman [in Everyday Feminism](#). "Treat me as you would treat anyone else. That's all you need."

What to do instead: Say nothing. If you're curious about why religious people choose to wear certain articles of clothing, read articles or books by those who do it. Don't go around asking random colleagues about their life choices.