

# 21st Century Discrimination: Micro- Inequities

By Natalie Holder-Winfield



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Kahleel Faroud was the first Muslim to work on a team of mostly Jewish analysts for an investment banking firm. Although Kahleel was enthusiastically recruited to the team, it was clear after a few months that he was not a member of the team. “Once I joined the team I noticed that I wasn’t being trained,” he said. “I was not given any feedback, so basically I had to learn on my own while others were being taken under the wings of senior people. I was given limited guidance, and I could have easily made mistakes that could jeopardize my licenses or give an investment idea that was not suitable for the client.” Seeing a limited future for himself, Kahleel resigned after a mere four months.

As an employment lawyer, I met people like Kahleel every day. Rarely did my clients complain strictly about discrimination based on derogatory slurs or jokes that obviously violated the anti-discrimination statutes; instead, I found that today’s employees encountered discrimination that was much more subtle but just as deleterious. From being denied training to being “accidentally” left out of key meetings, micro-inequities are increasingly becoming the new manifestation of discrimination.

## What Are Micro-inequities?

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Mary Rowe, MIT Ombudsperson and Adjunct Professor of Negotiation and Conflict Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management, defines micro-inequities as “small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be ‘different.’” (*Micro-affirmations & Micro-inequities*, Journal of the International Ombudsman Association, Volume 1, Number 1, March 2008).

Although there are a million different manifestations of micro-inequities, through research I found that there are 10 common categories of micro-inequities: 1) absence of informal mentoring; 2) lack of quality work assignments and promotions; 3) perceived underperformance; 4) insensitivity; 5) inability to recover from mistakes; 6) aggressive communication; 7) dual identity; 8) assumptions, slights and other annoyances; 9) being the first and not having an extensive network; 10) isolation and being ignored. (*Recruiting & Retaining A Diverse Workforce: New Rules for a New Generation* 2007).

The likelihood of encountering micro-inequities increases the more that someone is perceived to be different; for instance, the only woman in a department or the only Asian on a team. The Stanford University study, *Common Ground and Cultural Prominence: How Conversation Reinforces Culture*, found that “because it’s human nature for people to try to find common ground when talking to others, simple everyday conversations could have the unfortunate side effect of blocking many of the best and most innovative ideas from the collective social consciousness.” This study helps to explain why after three decades of anti-discrimination training, people may consciously know that it is wrong to discriminate against people who they perceive as different, yet they still act upon the unconscious desire to bond with people who remind them of themselves. As a result, they ostracize those whom they deem as different.

This is not to say that overt discrimination no longer exists. We still live in a society where Don Imus, a multimillion-dollar-earning radio host, feels comfortable enough to call the women on a predominantly black basketball team “nappy-headed hos.”

## Removing Barriers to Inclusion

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While some companies may throw up their hands in defeat because they believe that they can't do anything to eradicate micro-inequities, subtle discrimination is a challenge that corporations can meet head on.

Cassandra Phillips is a fine example of what happens when micro-inequities are challenged. "It was only after I arrived at the private club where my group was meeting that I learned that the club did not allow women to enter through the main entrance," Phillips said. "After some negotiations, the staff at the private club took me around the back entrance of the club and up the side steps. There was a moment where I debated whether I should go through the back stairs or not. All the men in the meeting (because there weren't any women on the committee) were mortified by what happened. It never dawned on them that this would happen. After the lunch, they thanked me for attending the meeting. At the end of the lunch, the men went in solidarity down the back stairs with me and never had lunch again at that place."

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