

You hear a white coworker say they aren't privileged because they grew up poor.

WHY IT MATTERS This kind of thinking is fairly common, as 63 percent of white Americans say they don't benefit much or at all from being white. When white people don't accept that there are benefits to being white, they cast doubt on the idea that racial inequality exists at all. The comment also invalidates the lived experiences of nonwhite coworkers, who deal with racial inequality as a part of their daily lives.

WHAT TO DO You can tell your coworker you know they've worked hard to get where they are. Then explain that benefiting from white privilege doesn't mean they haven't struggled. Their challenges may be economic, health related, or derive from another source, but racism has not been one of their burdens. Put another way, they haven't struggled because they are white.

WHY IT HAPPENS Even though it hugely benefits them, white privilege can be invisible to those who have it. It's the privilege of not being treated with suspicion by store clerks or regularly pulled over by police. It can mean being hired over a Black candidate with similar experience or getting a mortgage when a Latino in the same financial situation is denied one. Even when people know white privilege exists, they can be reluctant to admit it applies to them. It can make them feel defensive and as if their own hard work is invalidated.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

Your manager suggests having a "powwow."

WHY IT MATTERS This is a misuse of the word "powwow," a social gathering that often holds spiritual significance for Native American people. Misusing words and phrases like "powwow," "spirit animal," and "low man on the totem pole" may feel harmless to non-Native Americans. But to Native Americans, it can seem mocking and derogatory.

WHAT TO DO Speak up in the moment by saying, "I'm happy to have a meeting, but I want to mention one thing. You might not know this, but the word 'powwow' has real meaning to Native Americans. It doesn't simply mean a meeting." You can also explain WHY IT MATTERS. Or you could ask, "Are you trying to say you want to have a meeting?" This can prompt your manager to reflect on their language choice.

WHY IT HAPPENS This type of cultural appropriation occurs when there is a power imbalance between cultures. People from a dominant culture feel able to use parts of a marginalized culture in any way they choose, including in ways that rob it of its original meaning.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A coworker says, “I don't see color.”

WHY IT MATTERS This comment denies a fundamental part of people’s identities. It also suggests that if we choose to ignore racism, it will go away on its own. In fact, many studies show that when people or institutions claim to be “color-blind,” they often perpetuate racism by failing to take action against it. To combat racism, you first have to face it head-on, then actively work to challenge racist stereotypes and behavior—both your own and those of others.

WHAT TO DO You could ask a question to make your coworker reflect: “What’s wrong with acknowledging someone's race? Everyone’s identity is unique and should be appreciated.” Explain that while you understand they think they’re being fair and objective, “not seeing color” can make racism worse. Point out that this way of thinking signals that someone’s not interested in challenging racist behavior, whether or not that was the intention.

WHY IT HAPPENS Your coworker may wish to deny that racism still exists. Or they may be falling into the trap of thinking that “not seeing color” is a way of avoiding racism, when in fact it perpetuates racism.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

In a debrief after a round of job interviews, someone says of a candidate, “She seemed a little OCD.”

WHY IT MATTERS When people casually misuse terms for real mental health issues, like OCD, it trivializes the conditions and the difficulties faced by those who have them. If others with mental health issues hear comments like this, they may feel belittled. The comment could also unfairly harm this candidate’s chance of getting a job, as it’s a vague critique that's not tied to a job requirement.

WHAT TO DO Ask the speaker to explain their comment: “How does that relate to the job requirements?” Or let them know the language is problematic: “You might not know this, but casually calling someone ‘OCD’ can be harmful to people with mental health conditions.” Then explain WHY IT MATTERS. You can also ask HR about training that raises awareness of mental health issues and encourages employees to use more inclusive language.

WHY IT HAPPENS Many people are in the habit of using terms like “OCD” casually and inaccurately, rather than in reference to the real conditions they're meant to describe. This can be because they don’t realize how likely it is that someone around them has a mental health condition—nearly 1 in 5 U.S. workers does, but many don’t disclose this at work. It could also be because they haven’t learned much about mental health issues.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A coworker asks a woman of color where she is “really from.”

WHY IT MATTERS People of color hear this far more often than white people do, and the net effect is to make them feel that they are foreigners who don’t belong. Research shows that when heard repeatedly, this question can contribute to depression and anxiety for American-born people of color.

WHAT TO DO You could address this comment in the moment: “You probably don’t realize this, but people of color get this question all the time, and it can make them feel like outsiders.” Or you could take your coworker aside privately to explain why the question might make the woman feel marginalized, even if their intention is to try to get to know them.

WHY IT HAPPENS Your colleague may be genuinely interested in where the person is from and may not realize that the question can be offensive. They may also have a lack of awareness of the diversity of Americans, since the question implies that nonwhite Americans are not American. This assumption is known as “the perpetual foreigner stereotype.”

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

In a lunchtime conversation about politics, a white coworker asks, “I know slavery was horrible, but what does it have to do with what’s happening today?”

WHY IT MATTERS The impact of 400 years of slavery in the United States is still powerfully felt by many Black Americans, and non-Black people continue to benefit from its legacy. It is not a distant historical fact; it continues to shape Black people’s lives in tangible, painful ways. Hearing someone dismiss that can be jarring, even traumatic, especially in a work setting.

WHAT TO DO You might point out that the question minimizes the history of Black Americans. You can share concrete ways that slavery still shapes America today; we mention a few in WHY IT HAPPENS. If they want to know more, consider recommending some sources— for example, the documentary *13th* and the essay “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

WHY IT HAPPENS Slavery’s legacy is not widely taught in schools, which means that many white Americans never learn about it in depth. In contrast, Black Americans live with the legacy of slavery every day. For example, voter suppression still limits Black political power. Rules that denied loans to Black Americans, known as “redlining,” still hurt Black homeowners. And generations of unpaid labor fueled the wealth gap between Black and white Americans—even today, Black women own less than 1% of the wealth of white men.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A white coworker says to a newly hired woman of color, “Your name is really hard to pronounce. Do you go by something else?”

WHY IT MATTERS This statement is disrespectful because it suggests that some names (and therefore people) are not worth taking the time to get to know. It can also make the new hire feel like an outsider, signaling that she has to change who she is in order to fit in at work.

WHAT TO DO You could repeat her name, demonstrating that it’s not hard to pronounce, and point out to your coworker that it’s a sign of respect to pronounce someone’s name correctly. You can also explain **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS Your white colleague may be falling into the trap of considering white-sounding names the norm and therefore not realize how inappropriate their question is. If their own name has always been easy for classmates and colleagues to pronounce, they may never have had their name questioned like this and not understand how it feels.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A Native American colleague says in a team meeting that she didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving. Another colleague replies, “That’s not very American of you.”

WHY IT MATTERS For many people, Thanksgiving represents joy, gratitude, and coming together as family. But for Native Americans, Thanksgiving can be a reminder that many of their ancestors were killed when Europeans arrived in North America. In light of this, your colleague’s response could feel hurtful or judgmental. It also puts the burden on your Native American coworker to defend herself.

WHAT TO DO You could jump in on your coworker’s behalf. Say, “For some people, holidays like Thanksgiving are reminders of some of the worst parts of our history, rather than the best.” You might also explain **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS The comment may also reflect an assumption that Native Americans should try to fit in with mainstream U.S. culture. It also likely reflects a lack of knowledge. Most Americans learn history from the viewpoint of Americans with European ancestry, not from a Native American perspective. For example, many learn in school that Plymouth settlers and Wampanoag Indians held the first Thanksgiving in 1621. But few learn that just 16 years later, Plymouth settlers massacred hundreds of Native Americans.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A coworker asks you if a colleague, who is a woman of color, was hired to work with the “minority” clients.

WHY IT MATTERS This question is “othering”—that is, implies that people of color are different or outsiders. It may also suggest that your colleague was hired simply because she’s a woman of color, not because she’s qualified to do the job.

WHAT TO DO You could ask your coworker what makes them think that, or counter their bias by mentioning some of the specific skills and experiences the woman brings to the team. You could also point out the problem with the underlying assumption—for example, by asking, “Do the men on the team only work with clients who are men?” Later, you could ask your manager to publicly reinforce her qualifications.

WHY IT HAPPENS The question may be rooted in a biased belief that the woman of color is somehow less talented or capable than other account managers. It also suggests that your coworker views clients of color as less important to the business. Taken together, these beliefs imply that a woman of color cannot be on the A team.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

A coworker asks an openly bisexual colleague why she says she’s LGBTQ+ when she’s dating a man.

WHY IT MATTERS This question could make your bisexual colleague feel like she isn’t welcome in LGBTQ+ spaces. It may imply that she’s actually heterosexual, undermining her identity and suggesting she isn’t being truthful about herself.

WHAT TO DO Show your support by saying you’re glad that she feels comfortable sharing her authentic self. You may want to ask the offending coworker, “Why shouldn’t she, given that she’s bisexual?” You could also refer to WHY IT MATTERS.

WHY IT HAPPENS Research shows that bisexual people often have their sexuality cast into doubt. This happens in part because people tend to feel comfortable placing others into more clearly defined categories, like “straight” or “gay.” Sometimes people dismiss bisexual people as simply confused. Today, as more millennial and Gen Z women come out as bisexual at work, biphobia is also on the rise.

Credit: 50 Ways to Fight Bias

In a meeting about hiring, colleagues agree the most qualified candidate is a trans woman but worry about how clients will respond.

WHY IT MATTERS It's inappropriate to speculate about how clients would respond to someone's gender identity, just as it would be about their religious faith or ethnicity. The discussion also harms company culture, because it could make it feel acceptable to discriminate against trans people

WHAT TO DO Remind the group that they all agreed that she was the most qualified candidate and push back against the idea that you should give up on the strongest hire. You can also point to some of her specific qualifications and experience that fit the criteria for the role.

WHY IT HAPPENS Transgender people often experience workplace mistreatment, including difficulties getting hired and promoted. This mistreatment is often due in part to concerns that clients and other employees have negative attitudes toward transgender people. In this case, allowing such concerns to determine who gets hired results in discrimination against trans women.

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