How to Reduce Microaggression and Other Negative Racial Experiences at Work with Continuous Improvement

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Abstract: While government regulation or company policy can be used to curtail discrimination at work, it is hard to regulate away negative experiences like microaggression or perceptions of discrimination against minority employees in hiring and promotion. Using data from interviews with minority ethnic staff at a UK university, I present evidence of microaggression and minority employees feeling excluded and posit that perceptions of discriminatory policy engender negative perceptions of the organization. I further show the link between employee engagement and organizational performance and propose that minority employees' negative experiences and perceptions lower their job and organizational engagement and, eventually, impact organizational performance. I offer a solution in the form of an enterprise-wide continuous improvement program that would directly improve organizational performance by improving business processes and indirectly by improving minority employees' experience, perceptions, and engagement.

1 INTRODUCTION

Discrimination in hiring and promotion is addressed by government regulation and corporate policy. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 protects individuals from discrimination based on various grounds.[1] However, it is harder to regulate less overt forms of racism, like microaggressions, which are not illegal and can be dismissed as "hypersensitivity" by managers (Washington, 2022). Nonetheless, as the burgeoning literature on microaggression shows, there is damage to employees and, consequently, the organization (Young et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2020; Alabi et al., 2015; Velazquez et al., 2022).

Negative experiences in the workplace resulting from discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, age, and other characteristics persist despite the many solutions put forward. While employee sensitivity training can be beneficial (e.g., Kossek et al., 2022), management may view it as disruptive to routine work and discontinue these efforts when organizational priorities shift. Although organizations may train employees to respond to microaggression (Washington, 2022), an environment without these negative incidents would be preferable.

I propose continuous improvement (CI) programs to reduce the negative experiences of minority ethnic employees and, in turn, improve the organization's performance. My focus is on race, and by a CI program, I mean waves of multiple small employee-led projects across the enterprise running in tandem, with each project team having members from multiple departments. The team would define its goals to improve processes and, hence, organizational efficacy. CI would complement existing methods like diversity training, and even if senior managers do not see the need to address race-related issues, they may at least find improving organizational performance an attractive proposition.

I first analyze the data from interviews of ethnic minority employees of a UK university (most of whom are Black of African or Caribbean origin or Asian of Chinese or South Asian origin)[2] regarding their negative racial experiences and perceptions. I use this data to illustrate the concepts of microaggression and perceived job-related discrimination and consider how these experiences result in negative perceptions of the organization and feelings of non-inclusion. The experiences lead to minority employees reducing their engagement with their jobs and the organization, eventually impacting organizational performance.

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[1] These grounds include age; gender reassignment; being married or in a civil partnership; being pregnant or on maternity leave; disability; race, including color, nationality, ethnic or national origin; religion or belief; sex; or sexual orientation

[2] People belonging to ethnic minorities in the UK were previously categorized by the government as "Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic" (BAME), but the UK government now recommends the term "ethnic minorities." Here, I use the term "ethnic minority" or simply "minority ethnic" for race groups "other than White." However, the UK also has white ethnic minorities; see https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/writing-about-ethnicity for the UK government's reporting guidelines, which I have largely followed. Also, the UK equivalent of the US term "DEI" is "EDI", but I have used "DEI" for present purposes.

Next, I explore how CI improves organizational performance and employee engagement. I argue that CI – implemented through employee-led multi-functional teams across the enterprise – can affect all links in the chain, from employee experience to organizational performance. I present a conceptual model that integrates these various linkages and concepts to show why and how employee-led CI could improve organizational performance and limit the negative experiences of minority employees. In doing so, I offer organizational performance as a simple answer to the question of *why* organizations should bother addressing the negative experiences of minority employees.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I review related literature and provide some background on microaggression, CI, and employee engagement. In Section 3, I present a case study of a school at a UK university, and in Section 4, I consider how CI could address the problems raised in that study. Finally, in Section 5, I conclude with the study's practical and theoretical implications.

2   BACKGROUND & LITERATURE

In addition to overt and illegal acts of racism, minority ethnic employees can be subject to subtle and not infrequent negative experiences – or microaggressions – that, rather than "gross or crippling," are "subtle and stunning" (Pierce, 1970). As Sue et al. (2007: 124) point out, "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."

While I focus here on race, there are studies on microaggressions related to gender (Basford et al., 2014) and LGBTQ+ status (Galupo and Resnick, 2016; Nadal et al., 2016) and toward Chicana and Chicano scholars (Solorzano, 1998) and those with afflictions like multiple sclerosis (Lee at al., 2019) or mental health issues (Barber et al., 2019). There are also studies that focus on individuals in particular professions, such as librarians (Alabi, 2015). For example, Young et al. (2015) study microaggressions related to race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation among university academics. Indeed, many studies, this included, use the setting of a university to take advantage of their openness to such research. Commercial settings would be more challenging to study.

2.1   A taxonomy of microaggression

There are different ways to classify microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) propose these be classified as micro-insults, micro-invalidations, or micro-assaults. This work is extended by Williams et al. (2021), who review subsequent qualitative and quantitative studies to offer a taxonomy for purposes of replicability and comparison with similar studies (Table 1).

Table 1. A taxonomy of microaggressions (Williams et al., 2021)

	Category	Description of behavior
1	Not a true citizen	When a question, statement, or behavior indicates that a person of color is not a real citizen or a meaningful part of society because they are not White
2	Racial categorization and sameness	When a person is compelled to disclose their racial group, enabling others to attach pathological racial stereotypes, including the assumption that all people from a particular group are alike
3	Assumptions about intelligence, competence, or status	When behavior or statements assume a person's intelligence, competence, education, income, or social status based on racial stereotypes
4	False color blindness/ invalidating racial or ethnic identity	Expressing that individuals' racial or ethnic identity should not be acknowledged, which can be invalidating for those who are proud of their identity or who have suffered because of it
5	Criminality or dangerousness	Demonstrating belief in stereotypes that persons of color are dangerous, untrustworthy, and likely to commit crimes or cause bodily harm
6	Denial of individual racism	When a person tries to make a case that they are not biased, often by talking about antiracist things they have done to deflect perceived scrutiny of their own biased behaviors
7	Myth of meritocracy/ race is irrelevant to success	When someone makes statements about success being rooted in personal effort and denies the existence of racism/White privilege
8	Reverse-racism hostility	Expressions of jealousy or hostility surrounding the notion that persons of color get unfair advantages and benefits because of their race
9	Pathologizing minority culture or appearance	When people criticize others on the basis of perceived or real cultural differences in appearance, traditions, behaviors, or preferences
10	Second-class citizen/ignored and invisible	When persons of color are treated with less respect, consideration, or care than is normally expected or customary; may include being ignored or not being seen/being invisible
11	Tokenism	When a person of color is included simply to promote the illusion of inclusivity and not for their qualities or talents, expecting them to understand or speak for a whole ethnic group
12	Connecting via stereotypes	When a person tries to communicate or connect with a person through the use of stereotyped speech or behavior to be accepted or understood; may include racist jokes and epithets as terms of endearment
13	Exoticization and eroticization	When a person of color is treated according to sexualized stereotypes or attention to differences that are characterized as exotic in some way
14	Avoidance and distancing	When persons of color are avoided, or measures are taken to prevent physical contact or close proximity
15	Environmental exclusion	When someone's racial identity is minimized or made insignificant by excluding decorations, literature, or depictions of people that represent their racial group
16	Environmental attacks	When decorations pose a known affront or insult to a person's cultural group, history, or heritage

Studies of microaggression, particularly those related to race, have faced criticism in scholarly journals and media as a "pseudo-science" (Nagai, 2017). In this view, the development of a theory of microaggression "is the implementation of a highly politicized agenda and places a social change agenda above objective social science research." The result, according to these critiques, is "biased interview questions, reliance on narrative and small numbers of respondents, problems of reliability, issues of replicability, and ignoring alternative explanations" (Nagai, 2017). Lilienfeld (2017: 144) cautions researchers to temper their claims on the negative impact of microaggressions and the effectiveness of interventions as "conceptualization of microaggressions has become so sweeping as

to invite satire;" the author also notes the lack of precision in the term microaggression. The present study avoids these pitfalls, as I explain below.

2.2   Continuous improvement

Many organizations are already familiar with CI – in the form of quality circles, the lean method, or Lean Six Sigma (LSS) – as a way to improve organizational or business unit performance. Bessant and Caffyn (1997) define CI as "an organization-wide process of focused and sustained incremental innovation, recognizing that most innovative activity is not of the 'breakthrough' variety, but incremental in nature." The following studies provide useful historical perspectives, concepts, and a review of the literature: Bhuiyan and Baghel (2005) for CI, Hines et al. (2004) for the related lean approach, and Singh and Singh (2015) for *kaizen*, the Japanese equivalent to CI.

My experience with an LSS program motivated me to propose CI as a solution. A decade before the case study presented here, I led the implementation of LSS at the same organization, gaining first-hand experience with CI as multiple waves of enterprise-wide, employee-led process improvement projects. As Master Black Belt, I facilitated eleven projects – each completed in four months, six of these in tandem by the first cohort and five by the second cohort, with all participants being non-faculty staff. The employees organized their teams and selected the processes targeted for improvement: (1) the merchandising ordering process for the school's marketing and promotional activities, (2) the new faculty induction program, (3) the facilities helpdesk process, (4) the process ensuring the smooth running of facilities, and (4) the international students' letters-request procedure for securing accommodation, opening a bank account, and obtaining a visa. There were direct gains to the organization from these process improvements, and participants gave positive feedback on the more general benefits of the program: "LSS is a structured and clear way of problem reduction and elimination," "You can gain project management skills and better knowledge of suppliers," and "LSS has improved communications with other departments."

Although there are many ways to implement CI, based on my experience, I am advocating multiple waves of many small team-based projects running enterprise-wide in tandem. In my proposal, each project team selects its members and a target business process for improvement, with team members thus likely to be from different departments.

2.3   Employee Engagement

The study of employee engagement has expanded in recent years with increasing interest from organizations, although gaps in the literature remain (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Employee engagement is variously understood as "the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002:269), "an individual employee's

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010: 103), or "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990:694).

As with other forms of social exchange, worker–employer relationships entail mutual commitments if the parties abide by specific rules (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Indeed, researchers associated employee engagement with outcomes that are *individual* (such as job satisfaction, turnover, innovation, individual job performance, and organizational success) and *organizational* (Saks, 2006; Jin & McDonald, 2017). Employee engagement improves organizational (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019) and business-unit (Harter et al., 2002) performance. Saks (2006) distinguishes employee engagement with the job and engagement with the organization, both of which positively impact organizational performance. Thus, organizational performance can be improved by increasing employee engagement. The operations management literature has yet to consider the engagement aspect of performance improvement (cf. Smith and Bititci, 2017); I address this here.

3   MICROAGGRESSION & OTHER NEGATIVE RACIAL EXPERIENCES AT WORK: A CASE STUDY

In 2020, there were protests in the UK against racism, including the country's history of colonialism and slavery, following the brutal killing in the US of George Floyd Jr. by Minneapolis police on May 25. In response, the Dean of a school at a UK-based university instituted a five-person panel to study any negative race-related experiences of minority employees in a workforce that included approximately 300 full-time employees. The panel e-mailed 33 minority ethnic employees about its remit to collect information, on the promise of anonymity, in response to a single question about their personal experiences or perceptions of "discrimination" or negative race-related experiences at work. The panel did not include themselves as respondents. Four of the 33 minority employees said they had no such negative experience to report; the other 29 employees agreed to meet for an interview or shared their perceptions and experiences by e-mail.

The individual panel members entered the text of the interviews and e-mail responses into a spreadsheet, divided into 191 statement units, one for each report of a discrete experience or perception of discrimination in the workplace (Alabi, 2015) and categorized as follows: (1) negative or non-inclusive experiences (107 statements), (2) unsatisfactory leadership of the organization or policy implementation (41 statements), and (3) perceptions of discriminatory hiring or promotion (43 statements). The panel eventually submitted a report with recommendations to the Dean, appending the statements collected. My starting point is these 191 statements ("experiences" and "perceptions"), with no identifying data or details on the data-gathering mode employed.

The various concerns expressed in the literature about the limitations of microaggression research do not apply to the data collected in this setting. The panel did not design their effort around microaggression or any other theory, given their specific remit and practical intent. In retrospect, the data-gathering effort inadvertently overcame the empirical criticisms of microaggression studies (e.g., Althai, 2017) in four ways: (1) The interviewers only asked a single question about the experiences and perceptions of minority ethnic employees. (2) The panel did not ask any leading questions about any specific type of discrimination or microaggression, and four out of 33 respondents did not report any negative experiences. (3) Although the sample of 33 respondents is small, it covers more than half the school's estimated population of minority employees. Moreover, the information obtained is comparable to that reported in other qualitative studies in the literature, suggesting its reliability. (4) Although "the negative reactions of minority individuals [could still be linked] to personal defects of minority individuals or of minority races as a whole" (Lilienfeld, 2017), the interviews only sought to elicit the lived experiences of minority employees.

3.1 Microaggression in practice

I begin by analyzing the 107 negative or non-inclusive statements ("experiences") using the Williams et al. (2021) microaggression taxonomy, allowing comparison with related research (Table 2). For instance, the reported experiences of staff at this highly diverse UK university are like those of Black students in a "predominantly White" US university (Williams et al., 2020). Microaggression toward minority employees is thus not a figment of their imagination or simply a matter of "hypersensitivity," a characterization Washington (2022) cautions against; see Table 2.

Table 2. Reported microaggressions categorized using the taxonomy in Williams et al. (2021)

	Microaggression category	Statements from respondents
1	Not a true citizen	– I get asked uncomfortable questions like, "where are you from?" Or [as follow-up], where are you *really* from? – Some White staff members have been openly racist in telling me that, when Brexit comes through, people like me will be sent back to [country] even though I am a British national.
2	Racial categorization and sameness	– Some students have never been taught by a Black person until they came to [this department]. They show a stereotypical attitude where they do not expect high-standard teaching from a Black lecturer. As a result, they openly show disrespect; [their attitude] also comes out through outrageous feedback comments that are rude and arrogant. – Being considered "too" Black. Or being asked in disdain, "Is that a Black thing?" – People are always shocked when I turn up because I have a British-sounding first name and surname.
3	Assumptions about intelligence,	– Some people assume Chinese students to have poor English skills, even before they speak, or that they [the students] think in a stupid way.

	competence, or status	
4	False color blindness/ invalidating racial or ethnic identity	– I was ignored as a "minority" by the rest of the faculty group when the faculty group was looking into hiring an ethnic minority faculty (a "fair-skinned" minority ethnic person with parents from Northern Africa but raised in Western Europe).
5	Criminality or dangerousness	– I used a bit of butter from the staff fridge, which belonged to another colleague. This person came into the office and saw me; she proceeded to say, "Why are you using my friend's butter? You are a thief and criminal, and if it was my butter, I would report you to the police." – I shared a few videos with a colleague about Islam around the time there had been terrorist activity. I held this person as a friend and was trying to show the true meaning of my religion is peaceful. He took offense and called me a terrorist sympathizer and accused me and my family of being ISIS recruiters. He threatened to go to the police, saying I was trying to recruit him and his family.
9	Pathologizing minority culture or appearance	– My next-door office neighbor complained to security that I was listening to some Chinese music, which was disturbing her, but I had my headphones on. – We do not have a culture of drinking. But when we do things from our culture, it is frowned upon. – I cannot go to an interview with my natural hair or even a beard because I don't want to invite bad comments or to be perceived as being too aggressive. – They ask questions like, "Why do you [as Black Caribbean] always smoke ganja?" All I get is drug jokes – why not talk about coffee or something like that? – Years ago, a White colleague said in the open office that she was going to make granddaughter a *golliwog* [a blackface doll popular till the 1970s, but now regarded as a racist symbol] that weekend. – A White admissions officer had a meeting with a (Black African) candidate from Angola. After the meeting, the officer said out aloud, "I feel I need to have a shower." – A White colleague showed me a video of a White man doing a parody of a Black man, with their face painted Black…Why would they think I would think it funny?
10	Second-class citizen/ignored and invisible	– Students will ask to speak to my White colleagues instead of me if they don't get their way. They accept what I told them only when my White colleague repeats what I said. – I worked in a shared office and saw a colleague printing off a job application form, and after looking at it, saying, "I can't pronounce that name, so it goes on the 'No' pile."
13	Exoticization and eroticization	– I don't think it is OK to ask to touch my hair or to ask how long it takes to do my hair. I don't ask that about their hair!
14	Avoidance and distancing	– I have been here for over ten years, and I think it is now part of the culture at [this organization] to accept certain things. You can say hello to some academics and if they ignore you, you just accept it and move on. – I met a White colleague at some airport traveling, and she tried to be friendly with me, and yet when we meet at [work] we don't talk at all.

Some experiences – such as the witnessed refusal to evaluate a job application because a person states they are "unable to pronounce" the candidate's name – go well beyond microaggression (and the bounds of the taxonomy). Abuse toward a group of Chinese students (during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic) also goes beyond microaggression. Pierce (1970) offers lynching as an

example of *macro*-aggressions in the extreme. We must better distinguish between the types of aggression (Lilienfeld, 2017); the taxonomy does this well for microaggressions without overreaching into the territories of macro-aggressions like illegal discrimination or blatant racism.

3.2   Feelings of non-inclusion

For many respondents, the experiences of microaggression left them feeling that they were not being included, whether organizationally or socially, and, as a result, could not be themselves and felt pressured to fit in with a particular perception of the organization. These respondents felt their existence was left unacknowledged, a feeling well expressed in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *The Invisible Man* (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Feelings of non-inclusion

	Theme	Statements by respondents in this study
	Not being included, whether at work or socially	– I was born in this country, but I always say I am from [country]. Why is there a problem with people being proud of who they are? If I prefer an afro, let me wear it. If I want to eat jerk chicken, let me eat it. – If you don't fit into a certain club - not in the drinking club or smoking club – you are considered as someone who cannot be trusted. – [There is] a networking culture that can discriminate [against] a minority from a community who do not drink on religious grounds.
	Not being yourself – having to fit in	– We can't play our own music; it will be considered too Black. If we move and socialize as Black women, we get labeled as a "Black clique" or as "those Caribbean girls." – You are always feeling that you have to adapt yourself to the English way of life – when we do things of our culture – it is frowned upon. – Often, [it is] easier to conform to what is expected and ignore differences or other aspects from one's own background.
	Not being acknowledged	– Some (White) people get into a room and start a conversation and don't give even a glance or introduce themselves. – If I say good morning, the facial reaction is like, "Are you talking to me?" – An academic can talk to others near me and ignore me completely. – Some just walk past or blank you when you say hello. It makes you feel as if you are not part of the [academic department].

In addition to microaggression, there are matters of supervisors and managers being perceived as not following (or actually not following) anti-discriminatory policies or practicing discrimination in minor ways in day-to-day work, resulting in a negative perception of the organization. I consider both these perceptions.

3.3   Perceptions of job-related discrimination

Despite anti-discrimination laws and organizational policies, perceptions of discrimination in hiring and career progression and policy implementation add to employees' negative experiences (as seen in 43 statements out of 191); see Table 4. These perceptions need not result from active discrimination.

Instead, they could result from the opaqueness of policy execution, the high-handedness of supervisors in not responding to employees (minority or otherwise), or frustrations regarding a lack of career growth. These compound the negative experiences of minority employees, much like microaggression and acts of discrimination.

Table 4. Perceptions of job-related discrimination

	Theme	Statements from respondents in this study
	Perceived discrimination in hiring and career progression	– You are always overlooked for promotion; they will say no, this is down to your performance, nonsense. No matter how hard you work as BAME staff, you get overlooked. – Earmarking a position for someone [before advertising the job] seems to happen a lot. – We have been here eighteen years or so, and our work has always been said to be very good, and yet we don't get any school awards or promotions … Whites easily get school prizes, salary upgrades, and opportunities [but we don't] despite our impressive appraisals. – Promotions are for those that belong to a certain clique. [For minority staff], it seems as if we always require a White colleague to put in a good word. – There were two colleagues, one White and one [minority], doing the same role, but the White colleague was on a higher grade.
	Perceived discrimination in procedures and policies as implemented	– ___ [a minority full professor] was treated really badly by the MBA Office management team and was made to feel he was not good enough to teach on their program. – Black and minority people get passed over all the time when it comes to jobs. You will hear this White person or that get promoted, and you think: How come? – When I was on long-term sick leave, the manager at the time contacted me asking if I could answer e-mails from my sick bed. About a year-and-a-half later, another colleague (White) had the same surgery but was told to take as much time off as needed. – You will hear this White person or that got promoted (elsewhere in the school) … I thought all new [internal] positions had to be advertised. This is not a fair system. – My White colleagues were treated differently ... They were able to come in late so they could drop off their children at school, [whereas] every time I asked for something, I had to give a rationale and was belittled in front of other colleagues. – I was automatically placed on the bottom end of my pay scale and was told by the Head of the Faculty that this does not normally happen. – The policies may be progressive, but implementation does not seem to follow the rules.

3.4 Negative perceptions of the organization

I posit that employee perceptions of job-related discrimination increase negative perceptions of the organization and its culture. For example, many respondents felt the organization practiced discrimination in procedures and policies, with disguised or hidden racial bias and DEI or other "inclusive" policies that existed in name only. They were also critical of senior management as not diverse or engaged in DEI efforts (Table 5).

Table 5. Negative perceptions of the organization

	Theme	Statements from respondents in this study
	Overall culture	– The culture and environment in the school seem to encourage racism; it wasn't like that in the (main campus of the) university. – A culture where some students are allowed to be aggressive toward minorities. – There have been so many negative [comments] I have received from colleagues as a [minority] member of staff. At times, they make it seem they have reasons for their comments, but I get the feeling it's a race thing, and I am not good enough [for them]. – There is a culture of fear where the likelihood of losing jobs is often thrown around, so people don't speak about how they feel. – Everything at the School is driven by money; therefore, when it comes to culture, management pays lip service, and there is no real action behind anything.
	Organization requires "fitting in"	– You feel like it is a cat and mouse game, survival of the fittest, in which you have to adapt; you cannot be "too Asian," "too African," or "too Caribbean." – The environment is not inclusive; if you do not fit the White mold, you get nowhere. You are expected to change to fit in.
	Other minorities in the organization fit in with the culture	– Other minorities [colleagues] can also be racist. – A student made a racist comment to me, and I told the student it was not ok. I also reported it at the time to my manager, but he did nothing about it even though he is my manager and is a minority himself.
	Disguised or hidden racial discrimination	– They try to disguise the prejudice they hold about Black people and non-British people, but you pick up on it. – Diversity is [only] at the bottom of the hierarchy [to make it look like the whole organization is diverse].
	DEI and other inclusive policies exist in name only	– We are getting into signing [Race] Charters [but] it is [just] a box-ticking exercise. – The majority of [our] group feels that policies are there to be manipulated and not to help the [minority] staff. – Nothing will change: [there have been] many years of surveys and presentations of issues, but no actions followed. – Policies are not worth the paper they are printed on. We hear all the time we have no money for promotion or discretionary [salary increases], but they find it for White colleagues.
	Senior management is not diverse	– I don't want to see White people representing me [for DEI initiatives]. They cannot. They will pay lip service. They have put ___ in charge, who is White, middle class, who doesn't understand us or the struggles we have been through. – Heads of departments are generally White and male – there is a lack of attention given to other groups. – There is a lack of diversity at the top, which then often leads to racism and lack of inclusiveness.
	Senior management is not engaged in DEI matters	– Nothing will change due to [a] lack of understanding of the need to change and a "leadership bottleneck." – Now they seem to want to acknowledge [racism and discrimination], not because they want to, but because they have to.

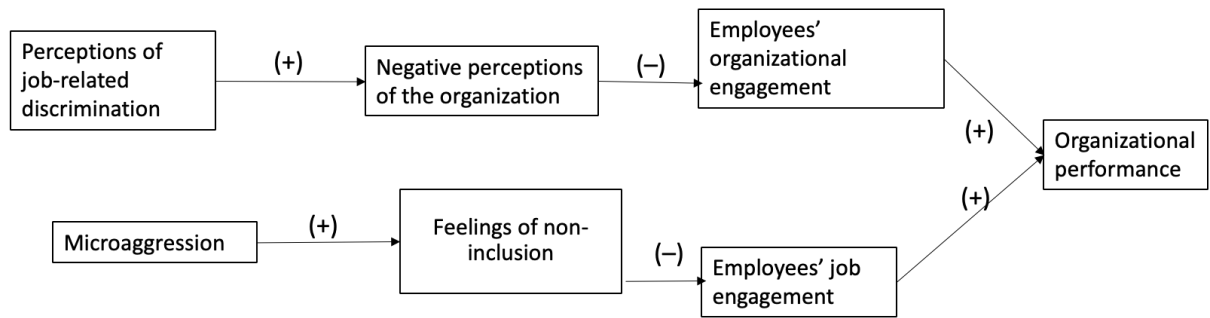## 3.5   Employee engagement and organizational performance

As I am proposing enterprise-wide CI, I switch tack to consider *all* employees, majority or minority, in the organization and, specifically, employee engagement and the eventual goal of improved organizational performance. Could the negative perceptions of minority employees lead to their reduced engagement? Although Saks and Gruman (2016) note the difficulties in establishing antecedents of employee engagement, I propose that microaggression and perceived job-related discrimination reduce that engagement.

The interview data provide some evidence of this. Although the interviewers did not ask minority employees for their reactions to experiences and perceptions, some respondents provided these. There appear to be two types of responses: "giving up" on the organization and "fighting back." Neither implies that the employee is engaged with the organization or their job, using the distinction in Saks (2006). "Fighting" carries a potentially positive connotation; the employee may be ready to work harder and engage more with their job (if not the organization itself) for instrumental reasons (recognition and promotion; Table 6).

Table 6. Employee reactions

	Theme	Statements from respondents in this study
	Giving up	– The general feeling that nothing will change is the result of many years of listening to surveys and presentations of issues, but without any actions that followed. – Inaction on identified issues of discrimination silences me. – Why put energy and effort to speak up, if there will be no change? – The message I get is, "Mister, stay quiet and just forget it. Be satisfied with what we give you."
	Fighting back by not "taking it" anymore	– And so, there is a need to understand us. We have to fight. – <Ethnic minorities> are used to conforming. For this to stop, we need to empower each other. It is time to do it. We need to pull people up and say this is not right. We have taken the jokes for too long. – I don't tolerate it, and I make my views known even if that means I am known as loud or aggressive.
	Fighting back by working even harder	– You have to fight and struggle to get forward for every promotion. You fight even if you do a superb job [already]. – She had to fight ten times as hard [as others] to get promoted. She launched a very successful ____ degree program but did not get the credit she deserved. It was as if she had to beg [for promotion].

I can now posit that (1) negative perceptions of the organization reduce a minority employee's engagement with that organization, and (2) feelings of non-inclusion reduce the employee's engagement with the job. I offer a joined-up conceptual model linking microaggressions and other negative experiences to organizational performance in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. A conceptualization of the impact of microaggression and other negative experiences of minority employees on organizational performance.

4   HOW CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CAN HELP

Next, I consider the different ways CI could improve both organizational performance – through process improvement – and minority employees' experiences and perceptions, which eventually impact performance (Figure 1).

Microaggression at work. Could enterprise-wide, project-based, employee-led CI with team members from different departments help with microaggression? To be sure, incidents such as announcing the making of a golliwog or sharing blackface videos will not disappear just because the organization implements enterprise-wide CI.

As suggested above, there are problems with attitudes and processes (Table 2), which may be improved by working on projects with people from multiple races and encouraging all team members to speak up against microaggressions. Regarding processes, the student-related problems experienced by minority faculty indicate a process failure of student orientation (setting the right expectations and explaining the proper conduct), which can be fixed with CI. Moreover, there would be less reason for conflict if everyone were working toward improving processes, i.e., with a common purpose. Any project is time-bound, and team members would see any unpleasantness during a project as similarly time-bound. Team members being from different departments would allow a shared perspective on processes and enable employees to meet and work outside their functional silos. The support of leadership and visibility encourage people to be on their best behavior. In this regard, I make the following proposition:

Proposition 1: CI reduces the incidence of microaggression in the organization.

Enterprise-wide projects could, perversely, encourage the development of even more extensive race-based cliques across the enterprise, but individuals could also extend themselves beyond existing cliques. The overall impact is likely to be positive.

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Feelings of non-inclusion. Such feelings can be diminished by being included in a project, especially one in which the top leadership is visible and supportive. Being forced to fit in is an attitudinal problem that can diminish over time with people working in cross-functional teams on multiple CI projects. The projects being employee-led also promote inclusion and improve attitudes. In my LSS experience, teams were self-selected, and the processes for improvement were chosen together. With everyone working toward improving an organizational process, employees, minority or otherwise, can feel included. A coach or project facilitator could help address any feelings of non-inclusion by keeping the team focused on project deliverables. I offer the following proposition:

Proposition 2: CI reduces feelings of non-inclusion.

CI can reduce feelings of non-inclusion directly and indirectly by decreasing microaggression (which is positively linked to feelings of non-inclusion).

Perceptions of job-related discrimination. Process improvements, including variability reduction, are at the heart of CI. Underlying many perceptions of discrimination is the fact that there is variability in policy implementation in daily processes because supervisors are not following processes uniformly, and the university does not monitor all supervisors and processes. Variable policy implementation on vacation, sick leave, overtime, and internal positions not being announced or only being announced after selecting people (Table 4) results in "defects." This university also has an issue with salaries that appear inconsistent with published numbers despite a public salary scale like that of other UK universities. CI can target these defects with Six Sigma or LSS. Process improvement could minimize this problem. A practical approach would be for managers to run specific projects to address variability in implementing HR policies. I thus propose the following:

Proposition 3: CI reduces perceptions of job-related discrimination.

Negative perceptions of the organization. Minority employees may, as a result of their perceptions of job-related discrimination, have negative views of the organization, mainly regarding failure to follow policy, whether a mere perception or a reality (Table 5). The organization could face legal challenges or face employees quitting. As discussed above, CI in hiring, interviews, promotions, and internal job postings would help. We also need to understand why the implementation of DEI (or other) policies remains nominal and why poor leadership in DEI is pervasive. CI's root-cause analyses can help attenuate these persistent perceptions. As such, I propose the following:

Proposition 4: CI reduces negative perceptions of the organization.

Not all solutions require CI – for instance, setting up a DEI office with a minority director does not apparently warrant a CI intervention, but there is a risk that solutions otherwise degenerate into tokenism or report generation without reducing the negative perceptions of the organization.
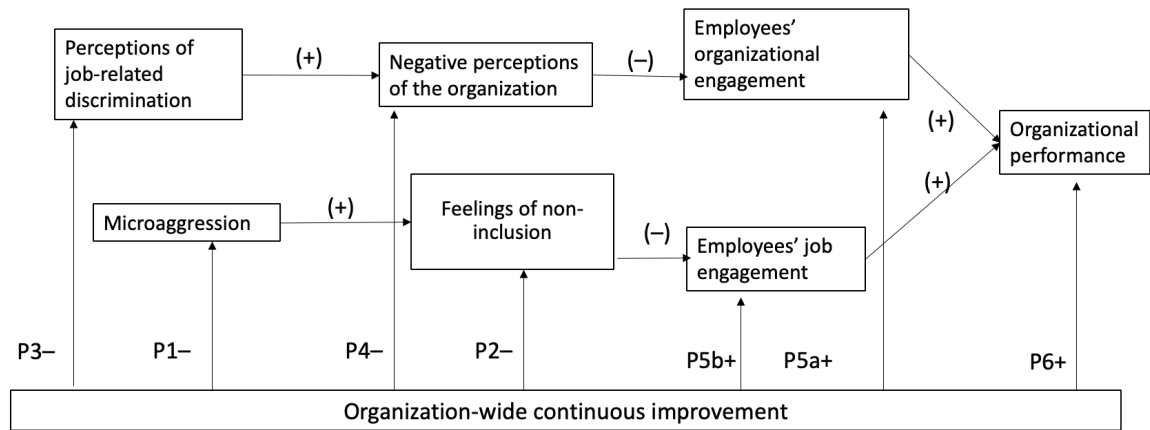
Employee engagement. Participation in an organization-wide CI program, with training and certification (e.g., Green Belt Six Sigma), should help employees feel engaged with the organization. CI is "participative, entailing the involvement and intelligence of the workforce, [and] generating intrinsic psychological and quality of work-life benefits for employees" (Brunet and New, 2004:1428). Bessant and Caffyn (1997) present a 2x2 model of CI of impact versus employee involvement at the organizational level, and Cheser (1998) provides empirical evidence of employees' internal motivation growing significantly in fewer than six months after the *kaizen* conversion of jobs in a US manufacturing plant. I therefore propose the following:

> *Proposition 5*: CI improves employees' engagement with (a) their organizations and (b) their jobs.

Organizational performance. Organizations could integrate CI into job design, with individuals carrying on CI independently. Instead, I propose CI as an enterprise-wide program with employees working on projects specifically designed to improve organizational performance. The increase in performance would depend on how the organization implements CI, and there may be successes and failures (e.g., Bessant et al., 2001). Nevertheless, there are many stories of organizational success with improved performance related both to cost reduction and new product development. For instance, Bessant and Caffyn (1997) find that 89% of 142 UK firms surveyed reported CI programs improving at least one of the following performance dimensions: productivity increase, quality improvement, and better delivery performance. As such, I propose the following:

> *Proposition 6:* CI improves organizational performance.

P5 and P6 apply to virtually any organization and all employees, including minority ones. CI can improve processes and performance companywide. Employee engagement mediates this improvement, whether engagement with the organization or with their job. Combining the propositions, I propose a conceptual model of how CI could improve organizational performance in Figure 2.

Figure 2: A conceptualization of how CI can directly and indirectly improve performance.

The above model serves two purposes: 1) It links the negative experiences of minority employees to organizational performance, thus providing organizations with an economic rationale for DEI efforts; 2) CI can meet multiple objectives in improving the organization's performance and the well-being and engagement of minority employees.

5   CONCLUSION

I have proposed a conceptual model of how CI can help reduce microaggression and other negative racial experiences in the workplace. I have also noted that organizations should do so to improve their performance. Managers charged with performance improvement should be interested in CI, even if they think racial issues are manifestations of "hypersensitivity" or so-called "woke" behavior. I used data drawn from interviews with minority employees of one school at a UK university to illustrate microaggression and perceptions of job-related discrimination, negative perceptions of the organization, and feelings of non-inclusion. I then linked these concepts to workplace engagement and organizational performance, drawing on the engagement literature. Finally, I explained how CI can affect all links in the chain, proposing a conceptual model that draws together employees' negative experiences and organizational performance (Figure 2).

5.1   Practical implications

Microaggression and perceived discrimination at work are real and have a detrimental impact on minority employees. Government regulation can only do so much and the literature suggests the following practical DEI measures: (1) explaining microaggression and racist incidents – and their implications – to employees and senior managers, (2) providing a formal support system for people affected by microaggression and perceived discrimination, (3) identifying patterns of non-inclusion in workgroups and functions, possibly prioritizing "fit" (e.g., by national or even prior university origin)

over the organizational performance, and (4) ensuring transparency in job announcements and explaining the rationale for promotions and salaries.

However, such solutions may be merely cosmetic. First, managers engendering or tolerating race-related problems may also be the ones implementing DEI initiatives. It is thus not clear that the "leader's acknowledgment of microaggression" (Young et al., 2016) is an adequate response in all settings. Second, institutions may see DEI initiatives as regulatory requirements that reduce the likelihood of litigation at the cost of producing more reports and symbolically supporting rather than acting to address pressing social problems in the workplace.

Using CI avoids these problems, ensuring a focus on the organization's performance through a bottom-up approach and cross-cutting functional project teams. CI incorporates "micro" interventions (Sue et al., 2007) simply by having employees work on cross-functional employee-led projects and finding solutions in different teams. Pierce (1970: 279) suggests using a "street therapist…to conduct supportive-relationship treatment" to support minority employees against microaggression and to help change "the institutional processes which work to damage their emotions." CI can create many "street therapists" in the form of project leaders and colleagues interacting on multiple projects. Even managers who turn a blind eye to microaggression must seek to improve the organization's overall performance, and the business case for enterprise-wide CI should thus appeal. CI in educational institutions can certainly face challenges – see Antony et al. (2018) for implementing LSS at a UK university. My experience is that top leadership support is a fundamental requirement for success.

The CEO of a DEI consulting firm whose offerings include diversity and sensitivity training for corporate clients reviewed a version of this article and offered his support for the approach as

> help[ing] to reduce micro-aggressions and perceived discrimination and improve employee engagement and organizational performance with a platform that allows employees access to available projects in LSS, CI, etc., and participate in these projects in addition to their day jobs.

At the same time, he cautioned that there are pitfalls to watch for in how employees choose or are assigned to projects:

> (1) Assigning employees to projects can be affected by unconscious bias in decision-making or implicit bias in processes, resulting in even stronger feelings regarding discrimination. (2) Rewards granted to employees within (or across) projects can also exacerbate perceptions of micro-aggression and discrimination. (3) Racially diverse employees may misinterpret these projects as an additional inequitable load on them to make them work harder to get access to the same promotional and developmental paths that others get much more easily. (4) Exclusively staffing these projects with racial minorities or having a disproportionate number of minorities working in these projects can increase perceptions of reverse discrimination on the part of majority constituency employees.

Proper use of CI with many small team-based employee-led projects cutting across functions and involving all (and not only minority) employees can avoid these pitfalls.

5.2 Theoretical implications and future research

The conceptualization (Figure 2) offers an organizational context for microaggression that extends beyond employee engagement. I have also offered a larger canvas for enterprise-wide CI than before. Rather than focusing on the negative effect on individual employee mental health, as in the microaggression literature, my focus is on organizational performance. I extend the employee engagement literature by proposing the negative experiences of employees based on race (or other characteristics) as antecedents to engagement. I propose enterprise-wide CI programs as a helpful intervention in both fields. Finally, I bring organizational performance factors from the two streams of literature to the operations management literature and thereby expand the case for CI.

Still, the conceptualization is only a starting point for further research, including testing and comparing the model or its extensions with other constructions. For instance, Young et al. (2016) propose microaggression eventually reduces organizational productivity. I, too, draw a link from microaggressions to engagement to organizational performance (Figure 1), but is an instrumental approach the only one? Is there a case for reducing microaggression and discrimination-lite on grounds other than performance, and if so, how?

Studying why organizations continue to struggle despite well-publicized DEI programs may also be interesting. It may be worthwhile to explore minority employees' experiences and negative perceptions of the organization through the lens of social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This research could also be expanded to explain persistent wage differentials between minority and majority workers (e.g., Lang et al., 2005). Finally, although I focus on race, the conceptualization I offer could be adapted to consider issues related to age, gender, or sexuality; such efforts will help better understand approaches (like CI) that go beyond performance improvement.

To conclude, my proposal to use CI is in line with Pierce's (1970: 266) exhortation that society does not need "new laws or innovative plans" as much as "interaction which involves majority and minority citizens" to eliminate microaggressions and other negative experiences. Organizations can use CI as proposed to improve their performance and synergistically realize the goals of their DEI initiatives.

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