

Microaggressions

Coined by Chester M. Pierce, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.

- **Microassaults:** Conscious and intentional actions or slurs, such as using racial epithets, displaying swastikas or deliberately serving a white person before a person of color in a restaurant.
- **Microinsults:** Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a colleague of color how she got her job, implying she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.
- **Microinvalidations:** Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, white people often ask Asian-Americans where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

The central challenge in addressing microaggression is found in the understanding that these slights are often unintentional and may even be the result of a person in authority attempting to pay a compliment to someone. This creates the dual problems of a blind spot for the person in authority as well as the common reaction of defensiveness ("Well, that certainly wasn't what I meant. Why do they have to be so sensitive?"). Sue (2010) used the images of thumbtacks and raindrops on his books to illustrate the power of these small, unintentional, everyday microaggressions and to help the reader connect to the larger concept of how the volume and continual nature of these experiences are cumulative for the individual experiencing them. In other words, what matters is not just what an individual just experienced from you but rather that the individual had already experienced on the same day or within a short period. The cumulative effect of microaggressions is considerable over time.

Five steps to address microaggressions:

1. Constant vigilance of your own biases and fears
2. Experiential reality; interacting with those different from you in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity
3. Don't be defensive
4. Be open to discussing your own attitudes and biases
5. Be an ally, stand personally against all forms of biases and discrimination

To respond when accused of microaggressions:

1. Commit to a constant vigilance of your own biases and fears
2. Experience their reality. Find ways to interacting with those different from you in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity
3. Don't be defensive
4. Be open to discussing your own attitudes and biases
5. Be an ally, stand personally against all forms of biases and discrimination

Imagine an office manager in a busy community counseling center who returns to her desk to find a both a white and Black woman waiting to talk to her about an upcoming appointment. The office manager might ask the Black woman to take a seat in a waiting room in order to determine how to help the white patient while providing some privacy. By not asking which person was first in line and acting on the assumption that it was the white person, the office manager commits a microassault. This kind of action is closely related to discrimination and may also involve a direct verbal assault (Boysen, 2012).

Microinsults are actions that disrespect or demean a person on the basis of their group status (Boysen, 2012; Sue, Bucceri, Kin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). An example of this could be faculty member who is surprised a student is gay or has a mental health disorder like autism. The underlying message from the faculty is that people who are gay or have mental illness behave in a certain way. These comments or observations may come out of ignorance, poor access to teaching or information about ethnicity and culture, or simple stupidity. In any case, the BIT/CARE has a responsibility to address these microinsults because they have a strong impact on those they are directed at.

The issue of microaggressions as they occur in the college and university space are not always easy to identify and to handle gracefully. Increased training to identify, intervene, and manage these behaviors and comments is needed. Sue (2010) maintained that knowledge and awareness are key to recognizing and effectively handling microaggressions. It is unlikely that all BIT/CARE members will become experts in diversity issues or multiculturalism, but with increased exposure to the importance of this topic it may be that instructors can learn how to successfully engage students in these kinds of discussions.

Ways to expand your understanding:

Engage actively in learning about other's experiences. Nurture a curiosity of other's experiences while limiting your assumptions. Avoid seeing those different from you as having a duty or responsibility to educate you about their heritage, culture or group experience. Our role as allies is firmly seated in a personal responsibility to seek knowledge without making it the job of those who have been marginalized to teach us. We should each have a general understanding of experiences common to certain groups, but should not assume that the issues common to a certain group have been important to or experienced by a member of that population.

Consider these questions to reflect on or ask:

- How to microaggression impact the work your team does related to the campus community? What areas are most in need of programming and resources to address these issues?
- Why would the student conduct code not be an ideal way to address microaggressions on campus?
- What are some obstacles to addressing microaggressions on your campus?
- How do microaggression manifest in team conversations (remember to consider those from a race, gender, religious, disability and age perspective)?

Boysen, G. (2012). Teacher and student perceptions of microaggressions in college classrooms. Journal of College Teaching, 60, 122–129.

Sue, D. (2010). Microaggressions in Everyday life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Sue, D., Bucceri, J., Kin, A., Nadal, K., & Torino, G. (2007). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American experience. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 72–81.

Sue, D., Capodilupo, C., Torino, G., Bucceri, J., Holder, A., Nadal, K., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. American Psychologist, 62, 271–286.

Sue, D., Lin, A., Torino, G., Capodilupo, C., & Rivera, D. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogs on race in the classroom. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology 183–190.

Examples of Verbal and Nonverbal Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggressions	Message
<p><i>Alien in own land</i> When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born</p>	<p>“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?” “You speak good English.” A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.</p>	<p>You are not American. You are a foreigner.</p>
<p><i>Ascription of Intelligence</i> Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.</p>	<p>“You are a credit to your race.” “You are so articulate.” Asking an Asian person to help with math or science problem.</p>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in math & sciences.</p>
<p><i>Color Blindness</i> Statements that indicate that a white person does not want to acknowledge race</p>	<p>“When I look at you, I don’t see color.” “America is a melting pot.” “There is only one race, the human race.”</p>	<p>Denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences. Assimilate/acclurate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</p>
<p><i>Criminality – assumption of criminal status</i> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.</p>	<p>A white man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. A white person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.</p>	<p>You are a criminal. You are going to steal. You are poor. You do not belong. You are dangerous.</p>
<p><i>Denial of individual racism</i> A statement made when whites deny their racial biases</p>	<p>“I’m not a racist. I have several Black friends.” “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”</p>	<p>I am immune to races because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.</p>
<p><i>Myth of meritocracy</i> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes</p>	<p>“I believe the most qualified person should get the job.” “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”</p>	<p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</p>

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<p><i>Pathologizing cultural values/ communication styles</i> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant / white culture are ideal</p>	<p>Asking a Black person: “Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down.” To an Asian or Latino person: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.” Speak up more.” Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/ school setting.</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>
<p><i>Second-class citizen</i> Occurs when a white person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</p>	<p>Person of color mistaken for a service worker. Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a white passenger. Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the white customer behind you. “You people ...”</p>	<p>People of color are servants to whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high-status positions. You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood. Whites are more valued customers than people of color. You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</p>
<p><i>Environmental microaggressions</i> Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels</p>	<p>A college or university with buildings that are all names after white heterosexual upper class males Television shows and movies that feature predominantly white people, without representation of people of color Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color</p>	<p>You don’t belong. You won’t succeed here. There is only so far you can go. You are an outsider. You don’t exist. People of color don’t/shouldn’t value education. People of color are deviant.</p>
<p><i>Heteronormativity</i></p>	<p>“Don’t you want a family?” “Have you ever had real sex?” “So who is the man in the relationship?”</p>	<p>Your relationship isn’t real. You can’t be fulfilled. You must pick a side.</p>
<p><i>Sexism</i></p>	<p>“You’re going to stay home with the kids right?” “What she’s trying to say is...” “You should smile more”</p>	<p>You shouldn’t be working. You’re a failure as a woman. You’re not good enough. You’re not being listening to and valued.</p>

Theme	Microaggressions	Message
<i>Invalidation of Severity of Mental Illness</i>	<p>"You have a mental illness, but you seem so normal"</p> <p>"Why don't you just get out of bed and get some fresh air"</p>	<p>You must not be hurting that much.</p> <p>It must not be that bad.</p> <p>Why can't you get over this?</p>
<i>Classism</i>	<p>"Oh! I wouldn't think you live here"</p> <p>"Oh you haven't been to Europe, you really should go"</p>	<p>You don't belong.</p> <p>You're not going to lead a fulfilling life.</p>
<i>How to offend without really trying</i>	<p>"Indian giver."</p> <p>"That's so gay."</p> <p>"She welshed on the bet."</p> <p>"I jewed him down."</p> <p>"That's so white of you."</p> <p>"You people ..."</p> <p>"We got gypped."</p> <p>Imitating accents or dialects</p>	
<i>Dismissive reactions that occur when bringing up that a microaggression has taken place</i>	<p>"You're just being too sensitive"</p> <p>Eye rolling</p> <p>"You're always so difficult"</p> <p>"You're making too big of a deal of things"</p>	

Adapted from:

Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286