

Examples of Common Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that intentionally or unintentionally communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue, 2010).

Table 1

Themes of Microaggressions

Theme	Example	Message
<p>Alien in One's Own Land</p> <p>When people who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born.</p>	<p><i>"Where are you from?" or "Where were you born?"</i></p> <p><i>"You speak English very well."</i></p> <p><i>"What are you? You're so interesting looking."</i></p> <p>A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language.</p> <p>Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English-based name.</p>	<p>You are not a true American.</p> <p>You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.</p> <p>Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</p>
<p>Ascription of Intelligence</p> <p>Assigning intelligence to a person based on their race or gender.</p>	<p><i>"You are a credit to your race."</i></p> <p><i>"Wow! How did you become so good in math?"</i></p> <p>To an Asian person, <i>"You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?"</i></p> <p>To a woman of color: <i>"I never would have guessed that you were a scientist."</i></p>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites</p> <p>All Asians are intelligent and good in math or science.</p> <p>It is unusual for a woman to have strong scientific skills.</p>
<p>Color Blindness</p> <p>Statements that indicate a person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.</p>	<p><i>"When I look at you, I don't see color."</i></p> <p><i>"There is only one race, the human race."</i></p> <p><i>"America is a melting pot."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't believe in race."</i></p> <p>Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility or validity of their stories.</p>	<p>Assimilate to the dominant culture.</p> <p>Denying the significance of a person of color's race or ethnic experience and history.</p> <p>Denying the individual as a racial and cultural being.</p>

Theme	Example	Message
Myth of Meritocracy Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes.	<i>"I believe the most qualified person should get the job."</i> <i>"Of course he'll get tenure, even though he hasn't published much—he's Black."</i> <i>"Affirmative action is racist."</i>	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.

Note. Adapted from *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*, by D. W. Sue, Wiley, 2010.

Intention Vs. Impact

Having good intentions does not guarantee that someone will not be negatively impacted. "Just because I don't want to cause harm doesn't mean that my actions or words still don't hurt or offend the other person" (Cullen, 2008, p. 6). Review some common microaggressions in the chart below to compare the intentions with the impact.

1. "Some of my best friends are . . ."	
Intention	Impact
Often intended to make the other person feel comfortable, to build rapport, or credibility.	Feels as though you are showing a membership card for a group you are not a member of.
Instead: Don't try so hard. Speak of your friends and relationships as it is appropriate, not as a way to gain points.	
2. "I know exactly how you feel . . ."	
Intention	Impact
Often intended to find common ground or demonstrate empathy or compassion.	This will likely shut the other person down. You may have had a similar experience, but you have shifted the conversation to be about you instead of the other person.
Instead: Try asking them a question to further clarify their experience or try simply acknowledging their feelings.	
3. "I don't see you as . . ."	
Intention	Impact
Attempting to suggest that this part of their identity does not influence your judgment of them.	The person may end up feeling marginalized. The statement implies that <i>despite</i> their being ____, you <i>still</i> accept them or like them.
Instead: It is best not to discount aspects of someone's identity. Noticing difference is natural. It is the action we take once we notice the difference that requires our mindfulness.	
4. "What do YOUR people think?"	
Intention	Impact
To seek information about a group or perspective you may not be familiar with.	This statement represents a form of stereotyping that suggests there is a single response or feeling based on membership in a group.
Advice: It is best to ask someone what they think as an individual rather than as a spokesperson for their group.	

References

- Cullen, M. (2008). *35 dumb things well-intended people say: Surprising things we say that widen the diversity gap*. Morgan-James.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.