What Are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are statements, actions, or incidents regarded as an instance of indirect or subtle discrimination against members of a marginalized group, often resulting in harmful consequences to those groups (Sue, 2010). Such communication can occur both verbally and nonverbally and is often unrecognized and unintentional. In 1969, psychiatrist and Harvard University Professor Emeritus Chester M. Pierce originated the term “microaggression” to describe the daily insults and slights that he observed non-Black Americans directing to Black Americans. Since then, the definition has expanded to include any marginalized group member, including race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or religion (Johnson & Johnson, 2019).

The term “micro” is used because these interactions happen at the individual level as opposed to the prejudice or discrimination that is embedded in social systems, institutions, and policies and that affords a privilege to some at the expense of others based on various identities (Williams, 2020). An example of systemic discrimination is environmental racism; for instance, poorly treated water is supplied to a largely Black or African American city while predominately White neighborhoods receive properly treated water (Steinberg, 2021).

The "micro" in microaggression does not mean that these acts are of little consequence or can’t have life-changing impacts; they can and do. Scholars such as Dr. Ibram X. Kendi “argue that the term ‘microaggression’ diminishes the cumulative harm of the abuse. Microaggressions are, simply put, aggressions” (Runyowa, 2015). Microaggressions have significant consequences for the target of the microaggression and the cumulative effects are often life-altering (Sue, 2010).

Research has shown that repeated microaggressions can lead students and staff to feel devalued and their academic and workplace performance to be negatively affected (Cardoza et al., 2017). Nadal (2013) reported that the cumulative effect of microaggressions on members of the LGBTQ community was attributed to feelings of suicidal ideations, depression, higher rates of substance abuse, and an overall sense of victimization.

Unlike overt acts of prejudice, racism, and discrimination, microaggressions are subtle verbal and behavioral actions that many people do not even realize they are making. Although it may be more difficult to recognize microaggressions, it does not mean that the negative consequences of their impact are any less severe; they are often as damaging as overt acts of racism and exclusion (Nadal, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000).

Who Commits Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are often committed by people who have learned biased attitudes and stereotypes that are embedded in social systems, institutions, and the media (Sue, 2010). The subtlety of microaggressions is what can make them difficult to identify and address, often for
both the person perpetuating negative stereotypes and biased attitudes and for those who experience them (David, 2014). Many who commit microaggressions remain unaware of having done so and, on a conscious level, view themselves as fair-minded people who would not purposely commit a microaggression (Sue, 2010). This adds to the difficulty of challenging microaggressions, as people who commit microaggressions do not want to view themselves as people who hold beliefs of superiority and inferiority about race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct. . . . These everyday occurrences may, on the surface, appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights,” but research shows they have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of marginalized groups and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care, education, and employment. (Sue, 2010)

The table below, based on the work of D. W. Sue (2010), includes examples of microaggressions and the underlying messages they send. Please review this chart for added examples of microaggressions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Underlying belief, prejudice, or stereotype</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congratulating a Black student or colleague for being articulate and well-reasoned.</td>
<td>This statement expresses and perpetuates the stereotype that Black students and staff are not articulate or well-reasoned, or not as articulate or well-reasoned as White students or staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying to a student or colleague, “You speak such good English,” and further, “But you speak without an accent,” so, “Where are you really from?”</td>
<td>This microaggression is perceived by marginalized groups as offensive and invalidating because these statements reflect a view that racial and ethnic minorities are aliens in their own country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing to mispronounce a student or colleague’s name after having been corrected or using a nickname they have not asked you to use.</td>
<td>This microaggression communicates that the name, and therefore ethnic and/or racial identity of the student or staff member, is inconvenient and not worthy of the time or effort it may take to learn to pronounce appropriately, demeaning their ethnic or racial identities or heritage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recognizing Various Forms of Microaggressions

In recognizing microaggressions, it is important to note that they can be spoken, written, and/or environmental (Lilienfeld, 2017). These factors may not be entirely under your control, but how you respond to and approach microaggressions when they do arise can make a significant difference to the targeted student, staff member, or group, as well as bystanders.

**Spoken Microaggressions**

Although microaggressions may include covert comments that are demeaning to a person’s identity, they also include slights of rudeness and insensitivity (Solorzano et al., 2000).

**Written Microaggressions**

Microaggressions may appear in class and meeting materials, cocurricular and campus literature, or other written communications. It is helpful to be mindful of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes as you create curricula, policies, and procedures, but it is equally important to be mindful as you post statements, ideas, articles, and other materials (Sue, 2010).

**Environmental Microaggressions**

Environmental microaggressions may not be under your control; however, recognizing them and appropriately responding to them can significantly reduce their negative impact. Environmental microaggressions may include the lack of diversity in pictures of students, faculty, and staff in course-related material, campus literature, and institutional marketing material.

The table below shows examples of microaggressions that can be spoken, written, or environmental.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of microaggression</th>
<th>Examples of microaggressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spoken</strong></td>
<td>• Continuing to mispronounce or making jokes of people’s names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Misgendering (saying he instead of she or they) or deadnaming (using a former or birth name without permission)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assigning tasks based on assumed or stereotypical strengths/weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Speaking of Western or European values, beliefs, or perspectives as the <em>correct</em> way instead of as one way and not the only way</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Written

- Writing or posting statements that invalidate the experiences of marginalized students, staff, or groups, for example, “post-racial America”
- Sending written communications to individuals that disregard their preferred pronouns

### Environmental

- Buildings with stairs-only access and no ramps, which exclude people with wheelchairs, strollers, or who otherwise have difficulty climbing stairs
- Buildings or places that are named after people who symbolize racial or ethnic injustice to marginalized students or groups

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**Understanding the Impact of Microaggressions on the Campus Community**

Microaggressions can be found in all aspects of campus life for students, staff, faculty, and leaders. For example, a male staff member may speak over a female staff member and receive recognition for an idea that she was initially promoting, intimating that her ideas are not valued because of her gender, or a Black male student at a prestigious university may be asked which sport he plays, with the assumption that would be the reason he would have been admitted and not due to his academic credentials, or a Latinx student may be asked “Where are you from?” and when replying, “Utah,” the aggressor says, “No, where are you from, from?”

Members of the educational community who experience microaggressions are at risk for reduced participation, diminished academic and job-related performance, and decreased persistence (Assensoh, 2020).

Microaggressions can have the following impacts on the recipients:

- fatigue, anxiety, fear, and resentment
- depression and anger (Sue, 2010)
- health concerns such as increased blood pressure and depressed immune system (Nadal, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2010)
- disengaging from environments where microaggressions occur (Nadal, 2013)
- lower student and staff retention rates (Assensoh, 2020)

It is important to note that the regularity of microaggressions experienced by members of marginalized groups creates a cumulative effect that heightens the level of stress recipients
experience (Sue, 2010). At their root, microaggressions communicate to the target person or group that they do not belong, are not trustworthy, and are inferior or abnormal (Sue, 2010).

Recognizing, preventing, and appropriately responding to microaggressions are necessary steps to ensure that students, staff, faculty, and leaders feel safe and valued as educational community members. These practices will aid in promoting an inclusive environment and enable greater student and staff success.

References


