Recognizing and Mitigating the Impact of Microaggressions

**Student** [00:00:05] "You're pretty for a light skinned". Or like, "Since you're light skin, you think that you're all that".

**Student** [00:00:11] "Oh, how was school back when you were going?" As if it was in the twenties or something.

**Student** [00:00:16] "Wow. How did you get into UNC?"

**Student** [00:00:18] She seemed startled that I was taking so many. She's like, "You're really taking so many AP classes? Wow, that's so amazing".

**Student** [00:00:24] No, you're not. You're not from Philly. You talk too proper to be from Philly.

**Student** [00:00:28] I've been told to act more professional. I've been told to, that I'm you know, I'm just I, I have a lot of potential. We just need to polish you up.

**Student** [00:00:38] One of my friends, African-American male, we were walking through a museum in Houston, and we were the only ones getting followed by a security guard.

**Student** [00:00:47] And at one point when I was pregnant in a class and I had a professor tell me that, that maybe it was just my hormones that had me feeling like I wasn't being treated fairly in the class.

**Student** [00:01:00] He made sure to call on every other male student in the course, like in the class, before calling on me.

**Jandel Crutchfield, PhD, LCSW; Assistant Professor; School of Social Work; The University of Texas at Arlington** [00:01:18] It's important for all faculty, really, to understand microaggressions, because our microaggressions can actually limit how we expect students to behave or perform, which then actually does influence their behavior in class, their performance. And so it's so important to student success.

**Kristina Ruiz-Mesa, PhD; Associate Professor & Basic Course Director; Department of Communication Studies; California State University, Los Angeles** [00:01:35] So they can cause increased anxiety and stress. They can negatively impact student performance, academic engagement. And so, microaggressions are incredibly harmful in the classroom. They're harmful from peers, and they're especially harmful when they come from us.

**Beck A. Munsey, PhD, NCC, LPC-S; Department Head & Associate Professor; Department of Counseling; Tarleton State University** [00:01:51] I can tell you as a student, a young queer student, when I heard things that were microaggressions towards me or the populations that I were a part of, in the community, I shut down in those classes. In fact, there is one professor
who said some very hurtful things about gender and trans people in general. And I actually moved to the back of the classroom because I no longer wanted to sit up front any more.

**Santiba D. Campbell, PhD; Associate Professor, Psychology; Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences; Bennett College** [00:02:18] Microaggressions can have a negative impact on students, especially if they're already questioning whether or not they belong in that particular environment. Maybe it's a harder class they're not accustomed to, or are trying a different subject matter. So then if they come into a class and they're constantly being hit with these different microaggressions, it's going to make them question even more of they should be here.

**Jessica Weiss, PhD; Director, Office of Faculty Development/Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching; Professor, Department of History; California State University, East Bay** [00:02:45] When we open a class with the creation of community agreements, we’re creating an environment where students can make a number of assumptions. One is that we care about them, that we care about inclusion. Then as the class unfolds, if you have the presence of mind, during a moment where students get into a conflict or a microaggression occurs, you have a remedy that everybody has already participated in creating, and it's a common touchstone and a reference point.

**Santiba D. Campbell, PhD** [00:03:24] So in the beginning, think about ways to make your class more inclusive. So then when those moments occur, they'll feel like there's a little bit more of a camaraderie or at least a better understanding of who they are as individuals. And that's why you can use these situations as teachable moments when they occur. But it very much so starts in the beginning.

**Viji Sathy, PhD; Senior Lecturer; Dept. of Psychology and Neuroscience; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill** [00:03:44] I think, for one, you set upfront that you respect your students. And that's you know, that's part of my syllabus. There's a statement about respect in my syllabus, and I encourage them to not only respect their peers, but to also point out when they feel disrespected. So I think being explicit with students is important so that they know you are welcoming of that information, but also providing avenues for sharing that. Saying, after class, if you'd like to share anything with me, you can hang on after the the Zoom session. If there's anything you'd like to talk with me about, or drop me a line, or here's an anonymous link that you can provide feedback on, giving them a variety of means, because that also signals to them that you're open to feedback and in multiple ways. And so, then a student might feel more comfortable to share something that feels, it feels uncomfortable to call someone out on that.

**Student** [00:04:34] I think acknowledging those moments and being ready to address them rather than letting them be a surprise to you, would probably make it so that students feel a lot more comfortable in coming to you in the first place.
Viji Sathy, PhD [00:04:54] Well, faculty should absolutely address a microaggression, even if it feels, if it feels uncomfortable, that's the reason to do it. Because we're in a learning environment. And by standing by a microaggression, by not speaking up when it occurs, we're tacitly approving that microaggression. And that is not correct. And it's not supportive of the student who experiences, or students who experience the microaggression. And you miss out on the learning opportunity that you have for the other students who may not have seen it, or who saw it and didn't know what to do. So we can model how to approach a microaggression. If we do it well, then they'll have a tool in their toolkit the next time they see one.

Kelly A. Hogan, PhD; Associate Dean of Instructional Innovation, QEP Director, STEM Teaching Professor, Department of Biology; College of Arts & Sciences; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [00:05:34] So I think one plan for when you recognize that a microaggression has just happened in a session is to use some of the tools that you have in front of you that you use all the time with students. So one is to pause, right, and to ask the student to clarify what they meant, because maybe the words came out wrong. And so, you can say something like, I hear what you said, but it might be interpreted in a way that could be hurtful.

Student [00:06:05] Dr. Hogan is actually one of the only professors that I've ever had that has directly told us that microaggressions aren't okay. And if you hear a microaggression, let me know about it. It points back to her inclusivity and how she really cares about us. Not just the fact that we're, we're students in her biology class and she is there to teach us, but she cares about us as people.

Jandel Crutchfield, PhD, LCSW [00:06:31] If we are tackling microaggressions, I have to also wonder about my own biases or my own assumptions. And so, rather than assume what's happening, I ask a question. What did you mean by that? If you say someone is very articulate or they speak good English, what did you mean by that? And so, they may not immediately be able to assess that. "Well, I'm surprised that if you are an immigrant that your English is so good", then they have to interrogate what that actually means. They may say, "Well, I'm complimenting you because you're so articulate. Is that surprising to you?" Right. So when we're talking about issues of potential bias, we talk about issues of racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions. When you're talking about those types of topics, people sometimes become defensive. And so, I'm not telling you that you are committing a microaggression. I'm asking you to come to that conclusion by interrogating your own thoughts.

Cyndi D. Wilson; Lecturer, Center of Business & Industry; Department of Continuing Education; Hudson County Community College [00:07:29] When you say things to people and they take them in and they think about them and you take that opportunity to talk to them, I said, "But what you just said, let me tell you how it makes me feel". And that gives me the opportunity to explain to you why you shouldn't say that. Because this is how it made me feel.
Kristina Ruiz-Mesa, PhD [00:07:55] So if as an instructor, we make microaggressions, if they come through in a lecture or an example or in a comment, then hopefully we have created the kind of classroom space where a student will say, "You know, I'm hearing this and here is how it made me feel", or "This is not aligned with our community communication agreements". And so, if you have built a strong foundation of open and honest dialogue, hopefully your students will call you out on it. Because again, none of us are perfect. We are all continuing to learn, continuing to be better. And so, I've had students stop me and say, "Dr. M, is that really what you meant?" And I always say, "You know, I appreciate that. Thank you. And no, that's not what I meant. Let me redo that".

Viji Sathy, PhD [00:08:38] When a student points out that a microaggression has occurred and that maybe you had committed the microaggression, I think the first thing to do is not to feel shame. I think that's a really common experience, is to feel really bad about yourself and what you've done to that student. But I'd encourage you to be grateful to that student for having the courage to say something to you. It says something about your instruction and who you are as a person that they felt comfortable coming to you because they saw this as a growth opportunity for you.

Beck A. Munsey, PhD, NCC, LPC-S [00:09:08] For me, it's really going to that particular student that I offended and that I perpetrated this microaggression to, to, one, apologize and say, "I'm sorry. What can I do to make you feel safe in my class again? What can I do to amend the rapport?" And then the other important piece of that for me is to go educate yourself about that microaggression about, what do I not know about this population that I keep seeing microaggressions towards? And the responsibility is on the professor, not the student, to go get educated.

Student [00:09:46] You know, like Dr. Munsey said, "I'm human. I don't have all the answers. I don't always say all the right things. I'm human, but please correct me". He was always very open about us being upfront and honest, and if we didn't want to do it in front of the class, we could send him an email or stay after class to talk to him privately. And that all contributes back to just feeling safe and like a family.

Student [00:10:05] You're able to say, like, I'm not perfect and I'm going to own it and I've made a mistake and this is how I'm going to fix it and move forward. That's just going to make, again, us better professionals in our field so that we can better own our stuff because we're not perfect either.

Cyndi D. Wilson [00:10:19] If I said the microaggression and I did not realize that that is what I said, I would expect my colleague to point it out. Tell me, what did I say and how did you feel? I apologize. I can change. Because as a colleague, we work together and we need to be able to understand each other and work with each other. So give me that opportunity to make it right.
Beck A. Munsey, PhD, NCC, LPC-S [00:10:53] I think that just goes to show that you really do care for your students when you do a check in of those who survive the microaggression. If I feel like a student had a particular interaction and was really struggling or had some tears in class or left for a moment to go breathe and come back, I will definitely make my, I won't make them, I'll ask them if they wouldn't mind staying after class or if they want, or I'll check in later in the week here. "You know, I was just thinking about class today and I just want to check in to see how you were. I know it was particularly hard for you and, you know, how can I make class safer for you so that you can move from safety to bravery?"

Jandel Crutchfield, PhD, LCSW [00:11:32] When I talk to students about microaggressions, we like. Yes. So what did you, what did you think they were saying? And. Okay, they, they think that I'm not as intelligent. And that's probably the message that you can get. I could see how you get that message. And then also just saying you're not crazy, right? You actually are experiencing this. And it's based on assumptions about, you know, your language, your dress, the you know, the racial group that you belong to, your religion. Those things are absolutely valid.

Student [00:12:06] When we experience a microagression, we're very used to minimizing it and saying, Oh, that wasn't a big deal and just brush it off. But when somebody else steps in, it really validates the feelings that you have.