Microaggressions & their Impact on Professional Development in the Academy

Educators Collaborative Lunch
Tuesday, November 17, 2020

Facilitators:
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AGENDA

1. Icebreaker
2. Define what microaggressions are, the different types and how they differ from ordinary insults.
3. Explore the harmful impacts of microaggressions, and how that relates to professional development.
4. Explore interventions when faced with microaggressions (for the target, bystander and aggressor).
5. Open Discussion
ICEBREAKER
Originally coined in 1970 by Dr. Chester M. Pierce, to describe the subtle racial putdowns faced by African Americans.

Significantly amplified and researched by Dr. Derald Wing Sue, who also explores degradation of any socially marginalized group.

Sue’s (2014) latest definition: “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults to an individual or group because of their marginalized status in society.”

Contexts may include: race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, immigration status, etc.
WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

• **Microinsults** are subtle snubs, frequently *unknown* to the aggressor, that clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the target (Often the intent does not match impact.)

• **Microinvalidations** are communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of the target.

• **Microassaults** are explicit and characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack that hurts the target through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or conscious discriminatory actions.

WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

How Microaggressions Differ from Ordinary Insults

• Constant, cumulative and continual, without an end date

• Contain double messages that must be deciphered

• Symbolize past historic injustices and institutional/systematic oppression

• Constant reminders of a person’s second class status → emphasizes who has power and privilege
The key to understanding microaggressions is recognizing they are largely a function of power and privilege. It is the exertion of power and privilege that makes an offense a microaggression.

# WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

**Context Matters!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Marginalized/Oppressed Group</th>
<th>Privileged/Dominant Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>Transgender; Gender Nonconforming; Gender Queer</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical Level</td>
<td>Students, Administrative Staff</td>
<td>Faculty, Senior Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Level</td>
<td>High School Diploma or Less</td>
<td>4-Year College Degree or Beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Status</td>
<td>People with a physical, mental, emotional and/or learning disability</td>
<td>Able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning +</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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Adapted from Dr. Kathy Obear | Center for Transformation and Change
## What Are Microaggressions?

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<tr>
<td>Family Status</td>
<td>Single-Parent Household, Blended Family, Foster Family, Adoption</td>
<td>Nuclear 2-Parent Household (Birth Parents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Person of Color; People who identify as Biracial/Multiracial</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Muslim, Jewish, Agnostic, Hindu, Atheist, Buddhist, Pagan</td>
<td>Christian (Protestant; Catholic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Fitness</td>
<td>Perceived by others as too fat, tall, short, unattractive, not athletic...</td>
<td>Stereotypes of attractiveness and athleticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Origin</td>
<td>Foreign Born/Immigrant</td>
<td>U.S. Born</td>
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COMMON MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Venues or events where interactions occur most frequently in the academic workplace:

(1) Group meetings (committee, task force, ad hoc, departmental, university-wide, faculty assembly, academic council, retreat, etc.),

(2) Individual office meetings

(3) Official and social events (holiday parties, awards ceremonies, professional dinners, convocations, commencement, etc.)

(4) Casual encounters (hallways, elevator, coffee bar, cafeteria, etc.)

(5) Promotion and tenure

COMMON MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Curricular erasure
2. One-sided, deficit misrepresentation
3. Forced spokespersonship
4. Being confused for the other student
5. Mispronouncing and refusing to learn particular students’ names
6. Shortage of faculty of color
7. Faculty surprised by brilliance
8. No consequences for racist instructors
9. No acknowledgement of racist statements
Relative to more overt forms of bias, expressions of subtle bias can require more attention and cognitive resources on the part of targets to discern the meaning and intention and process individual responses to these acts.

Subtle bias is also disrupting for targets who experience microaggressions vicariously

A chronic state of microaggressions has major psychological consequences.

**Common themes**

- Cognitive depletion; burnout and disengagement
- Self doubt; feeling incapable of achievement as intelligence or authority is devalued or considered illegitimate
- Invalidation; the target is deemed “too sensitive” or “overthinking it”
- Isolation/alienation/loneliness; lack of mentors or peers; feel that no one can relate to the experiences of marginalized groups

How does this impact our work?

*Educator Dr. Valerie Young describes the following coping mechanisms experienced by people who have feelings of “Imposter Syndrome”:*

**Over-performing**
Overworking or over-preparing to compensate for feeling inadequate → burnout

**Under-performing**
Fly under the radar → bare minimum; don’t speak up or seek more opportunity
Procrastination → Avoid having to face a task or take advantage of opportunity that you don’t feel qualified for
Perpetual state of inaction → never starting or finishing; always in progress
Self-sabotage → showing up late to meetings, job hopping, etc.
HARMFUL IMPACTS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Not just harmful to the targets!

• Cumulative impact creates a potentially toxic environment
• Disrupts productive team dynamics (lack of value and respect)
• Obstructs effective leadership (e.g. unproductive mentor-mentee relationships)
HARMFUL IMPACTS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

ABUSIVE CONDUCT HURTS THE TARGETS
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Nausea
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Burnout

ABUSIVE CONDUCT HURTS TEAMS
- Reduces creativity
- Reduces initiative
- Damages trust
- Hinders communication
- Lowers morale

ABUSIVE CONDUCT HURTS THE ORGANIZATION
- Increases turnover
- Increases absenteeism
- Decreases productivity

Source: Boston University Sexual Conduct Training
More often than not, a target or bystander is likely to “do nothing” when a microaggression occurs.

Inactive behaviors:
1. Confused about how exactly to respond
2. Unable to answer because the incident occurred so quickly
3. Denies it happened
4. Rationalizes that responding probably won’t have any impact, and
5. Fears negative consequences, such as being isolated, being perceived as a troublemaker, or jeopardizing their job/position in the organization

HOW CAN WE RESPOND?

• Anger, lashing out or venting can be **counterproductive** in the workplace, especially when incidents may occur between people you will have to see or work with regularly.

• Challenging microaggressions by responding **productively and appropriately** can help create more honest communication and trust with the people with whom you work, and can help the aggressors understand your perspective and establish boundaries around certain topics.

1 - Make the Invisible Visible

Bringing the microaggression to the forefront of the aggressor’s awareness by verbally describing what is happening in real time and in a nonthreatening manner in order to reaffirm the target.

Example: A female student speaks up in a classroom discussion and it gets ignored or talked over. A male student makes a similar remark and it gets praise from a male professor.

Target’s Intervention: “Actually, I was trying to say something very similar. To the point I was making earlier…”

Bystander’s Intervention: A male bystander replies: “I’m equally interested in what [female student] was saying prior to [male student’s] comment. Can you elaborate on that?”

Affirmation communicated: You have good ideas, you are not invisible.

HOW CAN WE INTERVENE?

2 - Disarm the Microaggression

Instantly stop, deflect, or communicate your disagreement with the microaggression to force the aggressor to immediately consider what they have just said or done.

Example: A student wearing a hijab is working in a chemistry lab and a nearby classmate jokingly whispers: “Maybe she shouldn’t be learning how to make bombs and stuff like that.”

Target’s Intervention: Express disapproval by interrogating the intent. “What’s that supposed to mean?” or “Could you repeat what you just said?”

Bystander’s Intervention: A student who overheard the comment responds: “Hey, that’s not funny” or “Let’s leave this topic out of this discussion.”

Affirmation Communicated: This kind of language or behavior is not tolerated.

HOW CAN WE INTERVENE?

3 - Seek External Intervention

Report the incident to an authoritative body, seek out individual counseling or identify social support groups.

Example: A faculty member is overheard complaining about having to accommodate a new student with a physical disability, saying, “I just think it’s unfair to inconvenience and disrupt my lab just for one handicapped person. I don’t intend to comply with these requests”.

Target Intervention: The student has identified a campus community of persons with disabilities (other examples: cultural groups such as MISO, BUMC Pride, etc.)

Bystander Intervention: A colleague might speak to the department chair about this comment. A student reports the incident using an online portal such as the GMS Appropriate Treatment in Graduate Education tool.

Affirmations communicated:
This institution has committed the resources to support groups from all kinds of backgrounds and life experiences. In some instances there may be consequences for inappropriate behavior.

4 - Educate the Offender

Facilitate a possibly more enlightening conversation and explore the aggressor’s biases in order to point out how and why their comments are offensive to you or others.

Example: An African American woman comes into the office with a new hairstyle and her male supervisor comments, “I’ve never seen you wear your hair naturally curly. Can I feel your hair?” and immediately reaches over.

Target’s Intervention: The woman pulls away and responds, “Please don’t. I know you didn’t mean any harm, but hair can be a sensitive topic for women of color. I’d be open to chatting with you about it if you’re interested.”

Bystander’s Intervention: “I saw this great documentary on this topic. I can send it to you.”

Affirmations communicated:
Respect my differences.
That’s not OK but I am open to having a conversation about why.

WHAT IF YOU’RE THE AGGRESSOR?

Be open to learning and acknowledging differences

- Don’t get defensive! This is a form of invalidating one’s experience

- Cultural Humility: NIH defines this as “a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities.”

- Aggressors are often influenced by the persistence of negative stereotypes or misconceptions: when you learn more about microaggressions, you’re less likely to commit them

Source: Joseph L. Brown, PhD, Diversity & First-Gen Office (DGEN) and Stanford University
HOW CAN WE INTERVENE?

What if you’re the aggressor?

No one’s perfect

- If you make a mistake, recognize the target’s hurt and accept it as a learning moment
- Acknowledge the distinction between intent and impact
- Use the power of acknowledging your blunder, even with a simple apology
- Take time to listen and possibly participate in a constructive dialogue

Caution: It is not the target’s responsibility to engage in a “teaching moment”

Source: Joseph L. Brown, PhD, Diversity & First-Gen Office (DGEN) and Stanford University
HOW TO BE PROACTIVE

Carlos A. Rodríguez
@CarlosHappyNPO

“I see no color” is not the goal.

“I see your color and I honor you. I value your input. I will be educated about your lived experiences. I will work against the racism that harms you. You are beautiful. Tell me how to do better.”

... That’s the goal.
How to be proactive

Affirm the work of others

Acts of affirmation that can become conscious, as well as unconscious, can block unconscious insults and slights.

Examples:
- Give credit to others
- Open doors of opportunity. “I noticed you have an interest in ____. Would you be willing to join this project?”
- Provide comfort and support when others may be in distress
- Show interest in learning about the diverse perspectives and contributions of groups outside your own

Pay Attention Now – PAN (Dr. Kathy Obear)

1. What differences are present in the group? Which group memberships? And how many from various groups?

2. Who is talking? Who initiates the topics?

3. Whose ideas get discussed in-depth? Whose ideas don’t get much discussion and/or are discounted?

4. Who is quiet? Doesn’t speak as often as others?

5. Who interrupts others? Who gets interrupted?

6. Who has eye contact with whom while others are talking?

7. Who engages in side conversations?

8. Who brings up issues of inclusion and diversity? How do people respond when different issues of inclusion are raised? What issues of inclusion are not being discussed?

9. As you notice interpersonal dynamics that are not inclusive, wonder: Is this an isolated incident or a possible pattern of experience?

Adapted from Dr. Kathy Obear & materials developed by Elsie Y. Cross Associates, Inc. 1994 Delyte Frost, Et al. Tracking™
1. Have you observed or experienced a time where a microaggression was committed and it was successfully addressed?

2. What are some of the strategies that you have used to cope with some of the negative consequences of microaggressions?

Resource: “Recognizing Microaggressions”
Thank you!

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