

But I Didn't Mean It That Way: Microaggressions

Monday, October 24, 2016



Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

“brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”

-Derald Wing Sue

The concept of microaggressions dates back to the 1970's when Chester Pierce first described the everyday insults directed towards black Americans by non-black Americans. Psychologists have since added to the theory, building on research involving implicit bias, stereotype threat, and reactions to perceived microaggressions. Not everyone agrees that microaggressions are a major concern, but Derald Wing Sue argues that research is just now revealing the psychological damage that microaggressions can have on recipients of these discriminatory exchanges. He states: "Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory" (quoted in DeAngelis 2009).

DeAngelis, Tori. 2009. "Unmasking 'racial micro aggressions.'" *Monitor on Psychology* 40 (2): 42.

Pierce, Chester M., Jean V. Carew, Diane Pierce-Gonzalez, & Deborah Wills. 1978. "An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials" in *Television and Education*, Chester M. Pierce (ed.), 62-88. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, & Marta Equilin. 2007. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist* 62 (4): 271-286.

Microaggressions Exercise A

In the handout, draw a line connecting the statements in the first column with all of the possible interpretations from the second column. Each statement may connect with more than one interpretation. Be ready to explain each choice. Think critically about how a person could interpret these statements as a "put down."

STATEMENTS
"You throw like a girl."
"Just Google it when you get home."
"You are trashy/ghetto."
"You are a credit to your race."
"Everyone can succeed if they try hard enough."
"That's so gay."
[To a girl] "Math is hard isn't it?"
"How long have you lived in our country?"
"Being gay is just a phase."
"Don't be a sissy."
"Of course you have a bad relationship with your parents. You are trans."
"Everyone knows Blacks are more likely to shoplift."
"You speak English very well."
"I have Black friends so what I say is not offensive."
"That's retarded."
"María, what do Latinas think of about this situation?"

INTERPRETATIONS
Feminine traits are undesirable.
Society knows what is right and you are wrong.
You don't belong
Being gay is unacceptable.
If you don't have the basics you must be lazy.
Your one identity is your most defining feature.
You people are all the same.
I see you as your skin color only.
You are lazy.
You look like a criminal.
People with disabilities are less likeable, important, or competent.
People of your background are unintelligent.
You are not man enough.
Your gender identity is your most important characteristic.
You are not American.
Gender identity determines intelligence.

Microaggressions Exercise B

In the handout, read the statement in the first column and think critically about how a person could interpret these statements as a “put down.” In the second column, write one or more possible interpretations.

STATEMENTS	INTERPRETATIONS
[To an Asian] “Where were you born?”	
“I just believe the most qualified person should get the job.”	
“I don’t see race or color.”	
[To a person who sneezes] “God bless you.”	
“It shouldn’t be ‘Black Lives Matter,’ it’s ‘All Lives Matter.’”	
[To an African-American] “You are so articulate.”	
[To a Muslim] “You look like a terrorist.”	
“They only got into this school because of Affirmative Action.”	

Reflection Questions

1. Alvin Poussaint refers to the cumulative impact of experiencing microaggressions as "death by a thousand nicks." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.
2. When people discuss microaggressions, a common response is that they are "innocent acts" and that the person who experiences them should "let go of the incident" and "not make a big deal out of it." Do you agree or disagree with this point of view? Explain your reasoning.
3. If a person from a marginalized group pointed out to you that one of your comments was a microaggression, how would you respond at the time? Would it change the likelihood of your making a similar comment in the future? Why or why not?
4. Derald Wing Sue has argued that the impact of subtle prejudice, such as microaggressions, is more harmful than the impact of blatant discrimination. Do you agree or disagree with this proposition? Explain your answer.

Case Study 1

In week 4 of your genetics course, the students move on to the section that allows them to test their mitochondrial DNA. The students learn that a haplogroup is a genetic population group of people who share a common ancestor on the patrilineal or matrilineal line. Each student works individually on this assignment and shares their results in a poster session. Every poster must contain the results from the Mitochondria Ancestry Sequencing, a map of the geographic region with a high concentration on the same sequence, and a family tree.

Unbeknownst to you, David is a First Generation student with five siblings. He and a sister were born to his mother out of wedlock, the next three siblings are a result of her first marriage. The youngest sibling has another father. David had a difficult time creating his family tree and is embarrassed to have it displayed on a poster. Nonetheless he completed his project and is standing near other students who share his haplogroup. A student in the class notices David's family tree and states, "Wow, the people in your family look really different." David does not respond. The student examines David's poster more closely and says, "Wow, I'm kind of surprised you got into Notre Dame." This statement prompts others in the class to turn to look at David and to examine his poster. David, in an angry tone, responds, "What do you mean by that?" Just as it looks like things will become more heated the class comes to an end, and you ask David to stay behind.

- Is any part of this interaction a microaggression?
 - If so, what is the hidden message?
- What are your fears regarding student interactions in this class?
- What will you say to David?
- What will you say to the student who made the comment? To the other students?
- What might you have done to guard against this situation?
- What other thoughts do you have about the issues presented?

Case Study 2

Anna is a student in your general chemistry class. Several times during your lectures she applies hand sanitizer to her hands. During a group exercise, her partner says, "You know, you shouldn't use that stuff so much. It's going to make our antibiotic resistant bacteria problem worse." Anna seemed to get a little flustered, and responds, "Well, I don't really mean to...I mean, I'm working on it. I actually have OCD and it's just one of the things that happens..." She puts the bottle back into her bag.

Robert, the other student, responds to her admission by saying "Ah, I see. I couldn't tell otherwise. Yeah, I guess most of us science people get kind of OCD about our schoolwork. My uncle is actually a chemist and he is bipolar. I hear that vitamin D is actually really helpful for those sorts of things; you should check with your counselor to see if you can get some."

Anna says, "Hm, thanks, I should do that... So what do you think about this covalent bonding problem? Where do we start?"

- Is any part of this interaction a microaggression?
 - If so, which part(s)?
 - Why?
- If you overhear this interaction as students are working on the problem, would you feel the need to respond?
 - If so, how would you respond?
- What other thoughts do you have about the issues presented?

Case Study 3

You've agreed to sit in on one of your TA's American History discussion sections on a really hot day at the start of the school year. Most of the students coming into the classroom are complaining about the weather. Turner (who is part Native American) and his roommate Nathan are walking in and Nathan says to Turner, "Dude, why did you have to make it so hot out? You need to do one of your rain dances and fix this." They both start laughing, and Turner says, "C'mon man, you know I don't do that stuff!" Nathan continues, "No seriously, I'm dying here. You already know this early history crap...get out there!" They both kind of chuckle as they sit down and Nathan gets out his laptop so they can check the weather.

- Is any part of this interaction a microaggression?
- If so, as the professor, would you respond?
 - Do you feel like you need to say/do anything?
 - Would you tell the TA to say/do anything?
- What other thoughts do you have about the issues presented?

Case Study 4

You are a new postdoc in American Studies, teaching a course on media, politics, and culture. The class has a larger enrollment than most classes, given the topic and the 2016 presidential election. On the day after the first debate, you begin with a few questions about the debate and the role of social media. The students get really into the discussion, and the following comments are made:

“Trump is right, we should limit immigration. America was better and safer when there was less immigration.”

“Better and safer for who? Only Native Americans are not immigrants if you want to be technical about it. Hillary will keep us safe and maintain our constitutional rights.”

“Hillary has no integrity; she would lie about anything. She just wants to label Trump a racist.”

“Trump is clearly not a racist. He just says things to get people going, but his proposed policy is sound. America needs to stop allowing everyone in and concentrate on its own people.”

The conversation continues back and forth like this for a few minutes. You remind students that in addition to debating the politics of the candidates they are supposed to analyze how the media might influence peoples’ opinions about the debate.

Another student, Ryan, says, *“All-in-all I think the debate moderator was fairly balanced except when Trump was asked if he would continue his practice of name calling once in office. Trump refuses to be politically correct. The First Amendment says we can say whatever we want. He is right. Illegals are a problem. No offense Emiliano or Luis, but most Mexicans should stay in Mexico.”*

- Is any part of this interaction a microaggression?
- If so, as the instructor for the class, how should you respond?
- What impact do you think your response will have on Emiliano and Luis, Ryan, or any of the other students in the class?
- What other thoughts do you have about the issues presented?

Interrupting Microaggressions

APPROACH	MICROAGGRESSION	INTERVENTION
<p>INQUIRE Ask the speaker to elaborate. This will give you more information about where they are coming from, and may also help the speaker to become aware of what they are saying. Key Phrases: “Say more about that.” “Can you elaborate on your point?”</p>	<p>A white student to a black student: “Well you’re luck you are here at Notre Dame.” Theme: myth of meritocracy</p>	<p>Professor: “What do you mean by that?” White student: “Well, you know, affirmative action.” Then you have the opportunity to address the misconceptions and stereotypes about affirmative action.</p>
<p>REFLECT Mirror what the speaker is saying. This can help make the invisible (i.e. unconscious bias) visible for the speaker. Key Phrases: “So it sounds like you think...” “So what I heard you say...”</p>	<p>“As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.” Theme: denial of individual racism</p>	<p>“So it sounds like you’re equating gender and racial oppression. What are people’s thoughts on that?”</p>
<p>REFRAME Create a different way for students to look at a situation Key Phrases: “Have you ever thought about it like this...”</p>	<p>“If people of color just worked harder, they wouldn’t have to go on welfare or collect unemployment.” Theme: myth of meritocracy</p>	<p>“Let’s try re-framing that for a moment. What are people’s thoughts about systematic barriers that disproportionately affect people of color?”</p>
<p>RE-DIRECT Shift the focus to a different person or topic. <i>*Particularly helpful when someone is asked to speak for their entire race, cultural group, etc.</i> Key Phrases: “Let’s shift the conversation...”</p>	<p>Heterosexual student to LGBTQ+ identified student: “What do gay people think about the state of marriage equality?” Theme: token asked to speak for or represent a group</p>	<p>“Let’s open the conversation up to everyone. What do you all think of the state of marriage equality?”</p>

APPROACH	MICROAGGRESSION	INTERVENTION						
<p>REVISIT Even if the moment, or microaggression, has passed, go back and address it. <i>*This is important, as research indicates that unaddressed microaggression can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself.</i></p> <p>Key Phrases: “I want to go back to something that was brought up in class last week.” “Let’s rewind this five minutes...”</p>	<p>“Yeah, but Notre Dame Puerto Ricans aren’t normal Puerto Ricans.”</p>	<p>“Last week in class when we were talking about diversity at Notre Dame, someone remarked that the Puerto Rican students on campus don’t act like ‘normal’ Puerto Ricans. Let’s revisit that. What do we mean by ‘normal?’”</p>						
<p>CHECK IN After class, during office hours, over email, etc., check in with students – both those who verbalized microaggressions and those who may have been affected or offended by the microaggression. <i>*This is important, as research indicates that unaddressed microaggressions can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself.</i></p>	<p>Heterosexual student in class (with an LGBTQ+ identified student who has come out to you): “I just don’t understand why gay people don’t try conversion therapy. It’s much easier to be straight.”</p>	<p>“I just wanted to check in about class today when we were talking about sexual orientation and the conversation turned to conversion therapy. How are you doing?”</p>						
<p>KEY PHRASES</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>I’m going to interject here...</td> <td>What do you mean by that...</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Let me pause you there...</td> <td>So it sounds like you’re saying...</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Say more about that...</td> <td>Let’s try reframing this...</td> </tr> </table>			I’m going to interject here...	What do you mean by that...	Let me pause you there...	So it sounds like you’re saying...	Say more about that...	Let’s try reframing this...
I’m going to interject here...	What do you mean by that...							
Let me pause you there...	So it sounds like you’re saying...							
Say more about that...	Let’s try reframing this...							
<p>Avoid starting questions with “Why” – it leaves people feeling defensive. Instead, try “tell me more about that.”</p>								
<p>When addressing a microaggression in class, try to avoid using the pronoun “you” – it leaves people feeling defensive, and it keeps the conversation narrow (between a limited number of people). Instead, try using the pronouns “we” or “us” – it opens the conversation up to the entire class.</p>								
<p><i>Adapted from Greta Kenney, College of the Holy Cross and Northnode Domestic Violence Curriculum, 2008</i></p>								

Why Microaggressions Matter in the Classroom

- The occurrence of microaggressions can have a silencing effect on students
- Microaggressions can escalate conflict and increase tension in the classroom
- Students who encounter microaggressions may experience negative academic, social, psychological, and even physical effects both inside and outside of class
- Unconscious biases can influence grading and treatment of students in classes
- Asking students to represent their group identities limits the representativeness of ideas presented in the classroom
- The theory of stereotype threat suggests that students feel anxiety about conforming to their (positive or negative) group stereotypes, which influences performance in class and academic success
- Overall, microaggressions contribute to a less secure and trusting classroom environment

Strategies for Reducing Bias in the Classroom

- Establish ground rules and expectations for discussion and your classroom environment
- Address microaggressions when they come up using the techniques from this workshop
- Discuss microaggressions and practice strategies for responding to them
- Recognize your personal biases and take steps to reduce them, such as grading with no names attached or introducing certain perspectives that you disagree with
- Make sure that students have equal chance to participate in class – give students time to think about an answer, ask everyone to engage in discussion, and make sure you don't call on the same students over and over
- Before an assessment, reduce stereotype threat by allowing students to write for one minute about potential anxieties in class
- Use group work to get students with different backgrounds talking to each other and breaking down stereotypes
- Reinforce the idea that intelligence and success are not immutable traits
- Double-check your course readings, assessments, and lesson plans for content (or lack of content) about individuals representing different groups of people
- Do your best not to make assumptions about your students
- Maintain high expectations for students and provide a range of opportunities for them to meet those expectations

Additional Resources

Books

- Brookfield, Stephen D., & Stephen Preskill. 2005. *Discussion As a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gay, Geneva. 2010. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Goodman, Diane J. 2011. *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Groups* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nadal, Kevin L. 2013. *That's So Gay!: Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Nash, Robert J., DeMethra LaSha Bradley, & Arthur W. Chickering. 2008. *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, & Al Switzler. 2011. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Steele, Claude M. 2010. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Sue, Derald Wing. 2010. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sue, Derald Wing. 2015. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Journal Articles

- Armstrong, Mary A. 2011. "Small World: Crafting an Inclusive Classroom (No Matter What You Teach)." *Thought & Action*: 51-61.
- Aronson, Joshua, Carrie B. Fried, & Catherine Good. 2002. "Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat on African American College Students by Shaping Theories of Intelligence." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2): 113-125.
- Appel, Markus, & Nicole Kronberger. 2012. "Stereotypes and the Achievement Gap: Stereotype Threat Prior to Test Taking." *Educational Psychology Review* 24 (4): 609-635.
- Boysen, Guy A. 2012. "Teacher and Student Perceptions of Microaggressions in College Classrooms." *College Teaching* 60 (3): 122-129.

- Boysen, Guy A. 2012. "Teachers' Response to Bias in the Classroom: How Response Type and Situational Factors Affect Student Perceptions." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 42 (2): 506-534.
- Dovidio, John F., Samuel L. Gaertner, Kerry Kawakami, & Gordon Hodson. 2002. "Why Can't We Just Get Along? Interpersonal Biases and Interracial Distrust." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 8 (2): 88-102.
- Johns, Michael, Toni Schmader, & Andy Martens. 2005. "Knowing is Half the Battle: Teaching Stereotype Threat as a Means of Improving Women's Math Performance." *Psychological Science* 16 (3): 175-179.
- Kwan, Yvonne Y. 2015. "Microaggressions and Hmong American Students." *Bilingual Research Journal* 38 (1): 23-44.
- Lusk, Amy B., & Adam S. Weinberg. 1994. "Discussing Controversial Topics in the Classroom: Creating a Context for Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 22(4): 301-308.
- Nadal, Kevin L., Yinglee Wong, Katie E. Griffin, Kristin Davidoff, & Julie Sriken. 2014. "The Adverse Impact of Racial Microaggressions on College Students' Self-Esteem." *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (5): 461-474.
- Sears, David O., & P.J. Henry. 2005. "Over Thirty Years Later: A Contemporary Look at Symbolic Racism." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 37: 95-150.
- Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torina, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, & Marta Esquilin. 2007. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist* 62 (4): 271-286.
- Yosso, Tara J., William A. Smith, Miguel Ceja, & Daniel G. Solórzano. 2009. "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates." *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (4): 659-690.
- Young, Kathryn, Myron Anderson, & Saran Stewart. 2015. "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 8 (1): 61-71.

Online Resources

Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom.

Hinton, Eric L. "Microinequities: When Small Slightings Lead to Huge Problems in the Workplace."

Project Implicit: Implicit Bias Tests.

"Racial Microaggressions. An interdisciplinary research project at the University of Illinois."

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