



Microaggressions: Triggers and Responses

WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY

TEACHING ROUNDTABLE

LORNA HERNANDEZ JARVIS, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY
AND INCLUSION, AND CDO

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Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education

- ▶ Colleges and universities are to create environments in which everyone feels welcome, encouraged to learn and flourish
- ▶ Many who do not conform to dominant demographics don't always feel included, and their academic learning experience is negatively impacted.
- ▶ Microaggressions point out cultural difference in ways that put the target's non-conformity into sharp focus often causing anxiety and crises of belonging.
- ▶ We must find ways to engage with difference in more intelligent and nuanced ways, and train our minds to entertain more complex views of the world.

Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education

- ▶ Exclusion, Alienation, and discrimination persist within the academy
- ▶ Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination are in fact commonplace.
- ▶ Many see the responses to microaggressions as overreactions
- ▶ Implicit biases have serious consequences beyond hurt feelings:
 - ▶ Discriminatory hiring
 - ▶ Racial inequities in policing and broader criminal justice
 - ▶ Physical and psychological Health impact
- ▶ Microaggressions matter because they are SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES of a larger structural problem

Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education

- Call to downplay microaggressions underestimates the powerful effect of sanctioning them instead



Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education

- ▶ Calling out microaggressions can serve as a deterrent.
- ▶ Accountability incentivizes more thoughtful communication across lines of gender, race, sexuality, and gender identity
- ▶ It codifies the empathy that can lead to a more inclusive atmosphere



Microaggressions Defined

The Power of Micro-aggressions

- "...micro-aggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities (whether intentional or unintentional) that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative... slights and insults."

- (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin, American Psychologist, 2007)



Manifestations of Microaggressions

- ▶ Microaggressions was first coined by Pierce in 1970
- ▶ They are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of an underrepresented social identity
- ▶ Microinequities (pattern of being)
 - ▶ Overlooked
 - ▶ Underrespected
 - ▶ Devalued
- ▶ They are often unconsciously delivered as
 - ▶ Subtle snubs
 - ▶ Dismissive looks gestures and tones

Forms of Microaggressions

- ▶ Microaggressions may be human and environmental
- ▶ Microassaults
- ▶ Microinsults
- ▶ Microinvalidations
- ▶ Many subcategories with distinct themes have been identified



Impact vs intent

Categories of Micro-aggressions

- ▶ Assumptions of inferiority
- ▶ Invisibility
- ▶ Use of language to belittle
- ▶ Objectification
- ▶ Confusing equity and equality
- ▶ Assumptions of roles
- ▶ Denial of reality of 'isms
- ▶ Systemic discrimination



Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the agent, and oftentimes the target.
- ▶ Americans experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who believe in equality and democracy
- ▶ Find it difficult to believe that we possess biased attitudes and engage in behaviors that are discriminatory.
- ▶ We explain microaggressions away by seemingly nonbiased and valid reasons
- ▶ For the target there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened
- ▶ People with a Urep identity may find an overt racist act easier to handle than microaggressions that seem vague or disguised

Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ People believe the impact of microaggressions is minimal and often an overreaction
- ▶ Microaggressions can have a dramatic and detrimental impact on target individuals
- ▶ Many researchers believe the impact is larger than when overt discriminatory acts are experienced.
- ▶ It is the cumulative effects of microaggressions that result in diminished mortality, augmented morbidity and flattened confidence



Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ Target is caught in a catch-22
- ▶ Immediate reaction is “Did just happened?” Intentional or Not? How should I respond?
 - ▶ To answer these questions targets rely on experiential reality that is contextual.
 - ▶ For agent this was a single event and minor. Fail to see the pattern of bias, defend situation based on our morality and deny they discriminated
- ▶ Deciding on a response
 - ▶ Differential effects on target and agent

Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ Deciding to do nothing is a frequent response. It occurs when target may be:
 - ▶ Unable to determine whether a microaggression occurred
 - ▶ At a loss for how to respond
 - ▶ Fearful of the consequences
 - ▶ Rationalizing that “it won’t do any good anyway”
 - ▶ Engaging in self-deception through denial (It didn’t happen)
- ▶ Not doing anything has the potential to result in physical and psychological harm for the target individual

Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ Not doing anything for target might mean
 - ▶ a denial of one's experiential reality
 - ▶ Dealing with loss of integrity
 - ▶ Experiencing pent-up anger and frustration



Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ Responding with anger and striking back
 - ▶ Likely to engender negative consequences for the target as well
 - ▶ Target individuals are likely to
 - ▶ be accused of being oversensitive or paranoid
 - ▶ Be told that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about underrepresented identities
 - ▶ Give credence to the belief that they are hostile, angry, impulsive, and prone to violence.
- ▶ In reality the general situation has not changed
- ▶ “damned if you do, damned if you don’t”

Invisibility and Dynamics

- ▶ We need knowledge:
 - ▶ that points to adaptive ways of handling microaggressions by target individuals
 - ▶ Of how to increase the awareness and sensitivity of Agents (dominant culture) to microaggressions so we accept responsibility for our behavior and for changing it.



Impact over Intent

Responding to Micro-Aggressions

Exercise: Acknowledging Impact over Intent

- Rotate around the table and ask each person to take a turn reading a card
- Explore the Impact
 - Discuss the IMPACT of this example or statement on a person with a 'target' identity. How could this example or statement be perceived as hurtful?
 - Avoid tendency to deny or justify the hurt. Strive to UNDERSTAND the hurt.
 - What are ways the person could respond? Or react?



Purpose:
Exploring
impact of
micro-
aggressions