Microaggressions: Triggers and Responses

WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY

TEACHING ROUNDTABLE

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- 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.

- 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

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



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

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS Where are your really from? No where are you



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)

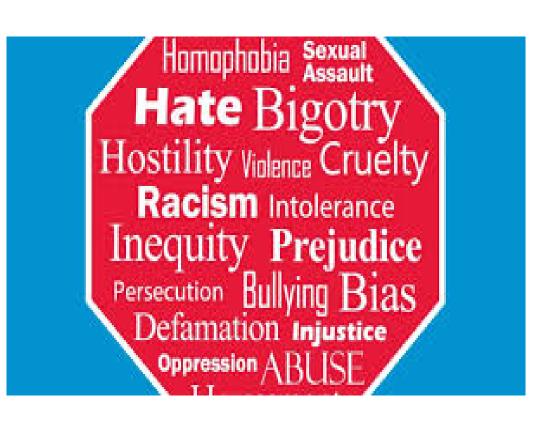


Manifestations of Microaggressions

- 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
- Microassults
- ▶ 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





- 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 microggressions 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

- 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



- ► 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

- 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

- 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



- 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"

- ▶ 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?



