



Racial

Microaggressions

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What are microaggressions?

Microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal snubs and insults based on social group membership. They are common in the lives of racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals. **Microaggressions are forms of discrimination and are hurtful even though they are sometimes unintentional or meant in joking manner.** They communicate hostile messages and are associated with a host of negative outcomes for the individuals/groups who experience them.

Why are microaggressions an issue in the workplace?

Microaggressions can be difficult to notice right away because they are so subtle and ambiguous. Because they are often said in a joking way or are unintentional, those on the receiving end may frequently feel that they are not serious enough to warrant addressing or interrupting the conversation. Recipients may also dismiss the harm they feel and the negative continuing effects of microaggressions, especially if others have told them in the past that they are too sensitive or should just “let it go”.

While individuals may be aware of official procedures for reporting overt discrimination and feel comfortable using them, most organisations do not have similar protocols for reporting microaggressions. Additionally, methods for responding to overt discrimination, such as involving a line manager, may be seen as inappropriate for microaggressions. Recipients may also worry about potential negative repercussions of reporting microaggressions immediately or in the future. If they are not supported by colleagues, they may feel that the confrontation will have little usefulness in changing the aggressor’s attitudes or behavior.

Confronting Microaggressions

The first step in confronting microaggressions is to recognise when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The following slides contain examples of common microaggressions.

It is important to confront microaggressions to help people realise their bias and change their behaviour. Confronting microaggressions also sets a norm that the behaviour isn't acceptable, so people are less likely to do or say something similar.

We all have a responsibility to confront microaggressions when we see or hear them even if they are not targeted at us.

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u><i>Alien in own land</i></u> When Asian Americans and Latinx Americans and others who look different from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born.</p>	<p>“Where are you from?”</p> <p>“Where were you born?”</p> <p>“You speak English very well.”</p> <p>“What are you? You’re so interesting looking!”</p> <p>A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.</p>	<p>You are not American.</p> <p>You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.</p> <p>Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</p>
<p><u><i>Ascription of Intelligence</i></u> Assigning intelligence to a person of color based on their race.</p>	<p>“You are a credit to your race.”</p> <p>“You are so articulate.”</p> <p>Asking an Asian person to help with a Math or Science problem.</p>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.</p> <p>It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.</p> <p>All Asians are intelligent and good in Math / Sciences.</p>

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u>Color Blindness</u> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want or need to acknowledge race.</p>	<p>“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</p> <p>“America is a melting pot.”</p> <p>“There is only one race, the human race.”</p>	<p>Denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences and history.</p> <p>Assimilate / acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial / cultural being.</p>
<p><u>Assumption of criminality</u> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race.</p>	<p>A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latinx person approaches or passes.</p> <p>A store owner following a customer of color around the store.</p> <p>A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.</p>	<p>You are a criminal.</p> <p>You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong</p> <p>You are dangerous.</p>

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u>Denial of individual racism</u> A statement made when White people deny their racial biases.</p>	<p>“I’m not a racist. I have several Black friends.”</p> <p>“As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”</p>	<p>I could never be racist because I have friends of color.</p> <p>Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.</p> <p>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.</p>
<p><u>Second-class citizen</u> Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.</p>	<p>Person of color mistaken for a service worker.</p> <p>Having a taxicab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger.</p> <p>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind you.</p> <p>“You people ...”</p>	<p>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high-status positions.</p> <p>You are likely to cause trouble and / or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.</p> <p>Whites are more valued customers than people of color You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</p>

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u>Myth of meritocracy</u> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes .</p>	<p>“Affirmative action is racist.”</p> <p>“I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”</p> <p>“Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”</p>	<p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.</p> <p>People of color are lazy and / or incompetent and need to work harder.</p>
<p><u>Pathologizing cultural values / communication styles</u> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant / White culture are ideal</p>	<p>Asking a Black person: “Why do you have to be so loud / animated? Just calm down.”</p> <p>To an Asian or Latinx person: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think, Be more verbal.”</p> <p>Dismissing an individual who mentions race / culture in work / school setting.</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.</p> <p>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u>Environmental microaggressions</u> Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels.</p>	<p>A college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper-class males.</p> <p>Television shows and movies that feature predominantly White people, without representation of people of color.</p> <p>Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color.</p> <p>Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color.</p>	<p>You don't belong, you won't succeed here. There is only so far you can go.</p> <p>You are an outsider / You don't exist. People of color don't / shouldn't value education.</p> <p>People of color are deviant.</p>

Microaggression	Example	Message
<p><u>How to offend without really trying</u> Referencing ethnic/cultural identities in derogatory ways</p>	<p>“Indian giver.” - a person who gives something and then demands it back</p> <p>“That’s so gay.”</p> <p>“She welshed on the bet.” – To <i>welsh</i> is to fail to honour a debt/obligation/promise that you have agreed to.</p> <p>“We got gypped.” – To <i>gyp</i> is to cheat or swindle someone. The term is derived from harmful stereotypes of Romani/Gypsy communities.</p> <p>“I jewed him down.” - The term <i>jewed</i> has a similar meaning to <i>gyp</i>. It is derived from antisemitic caricatures of Jews as tricksters/thieves.</p> <p>“That’s so White of you.”</p> <p>“You people ...”</p> <p>Imitating accents or dialects</p>	<p>Many of the phrases listed in the example column are common vernacular. However, when using language that includes ethnic/cultural identities, it is important to think about the origin of those references and how they may draw upon harmful stereotypes of particular ethnic/cultural groups.</p>

Now that you have seen some examples of the racial microaggressions minorities face on a daily basis, you can help to eliminate them from your community by confronting them when you see or hear them.

Though the themes and messages here are presented under American context, it is not limited to America.

Sources:

- Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286
- Byrd, M, Christy (2018). Microaggressions Self-Defense: A Role-Playing Workshop for Responding to Microaggressions. *Soc. Sci.* 2018, 7(6), 96

