discrimination

marginalized group   covert racism

minority   oppressive acts   people of color

slights   unintentional   snubs   POC

disabled   racism   demeaning

ial violence   cultural appropriation   dismissals   intentional

microaggressions   prejudi

aggression   stressful   target persons   nonverbal

insults   LGBTQ   hostile   WOC

political violence   subtle   derogatory

verbal   society

negative messages

[Image description: Word cloud featuring the words: discrimination, marginalized group, covert racism, minority, oppressive acts, POC, people of color, slights, unintentional, snubs, disabled, racism, demeaning, social violence, cultural appropriation, dismissals, intentional, microaggressions, prejudicial, aggression, stressful, target persons, insults, LGBTQ, hostile, nonverbal, WOC, political violence, verbal, subtle, derogatory, society, and negative messages.]

Interrupting Microaggressions

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

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Interrupting Microaggressions

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to introduce the term microaggression, enumerating its taxonomies, impact, and how to begin addressing & disrupting microaggressions when they occur.

Historical Origin

Psychiatrist and professor Dr. Chester Pierce coined the term microaggression in the early 1960s to describe modern-day racism in the U.S. Pierce stated that most racial offenses are "subtle and stunning" and that the "enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that the subtle blows are delivered incessantly" (Pierce, 1970, pp. 265-266). The repetitive patterns of aggressive acts/ oppression inflicted upon individuals of Color have an accumulative effect on the physical, social, and emotional well-being of people of Color (Pierce, 1970). Further, microaggressions may be exacerbated by intersectionality; that is, the volume of microaggressive acts may increase due to the intersections of other minoritized identities (e.g., people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, woman/girl, non-cisgender expression, etc.) (Williams et al., 2021).

Expanding upon Pierce's work, Sue and colleagues (2007b) further defined microaggressions as the everyday (non)verbal and environmental[1] slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to people based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

Makeup & Impact

Types

Sue (2010) identified four basic types of microaggressions[2]:

1. **Microinsults:** Verbal/nonverbal actions that convey negative assumptions about, disregard, or belittle
2. **Micro-invalidations:** Verbal actions that ignore, neutralize, negate, or dismiss the experiences and emotional realities
3. **Micro-assaults:** Small-scale attacks or disparagements using demeaning/ degrading actions/words

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[1]E.g., mascots, monuments, curriculum, etc. (Sue et al., 2010)
[2]For an updated, expanded list of microaggression categories and their definitions, please see: Williams et al., 2021, pp. 997-1003)

4. **Environmental Microaggressions:** Manifest at a systemic/ macroscopic level. These acts invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of the targeted person, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment (Sue, 2010).

Components

Microaggressions have two parts: One is the conscious communication of the initiator, which was likely intended to be a surface-level statement or act. Then there's the unconscious metacommunication, which is the message the microaggression sends.

Examples of microaggressions include (Williams et al., 2021):

- Explicit or implicit messages that implies an individual is not a true citizen
- Assumptions that people of a given race are all alike
- Any positive or negative ascriptions of intellectual abilities, competence, education, or social standing on the basis of racial, gender economic or disability assumptions
- Invalidating racial or ethnic identity, i.e., Color evasive (Annamma, 2017)
- Expressions of jealousy or hostility surrounding the notion that people of Color get unfair advantages and benefits because of their race
- When someone demonstrates a belief in or otherwise acts on

[Image description: Graphic of a person sitting with their head between their knees, as hands are pointing to them in an accusatory manor.]

stereotypes that people of Color are dangerous, untrustworthy, or likely to commit crimes or cause bodily harm. It could also include concerns about being treated badly by people of Color (i.e., verbal aggressions) leading to emotional harm
- When people of Color are criticized because of real or perceived cultural differences in appearance, traditions, behaviors, or preferences

Health & Wellbeing

There is evidence to suggest the association between microaggressions and adverse physical and mental health outcomes in minoritized groups[3]. These stressors affect both the individual and the collective [read: systemic], having lasting effects. Some health-related outcomes include (Williams et al., 2021, p. 992):

- Higher levels of depression
- Anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Impaired psychological well-being
- Decreased self-esteem
- Hypertension
- Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysfunction
- Higher body mass index

Subsequently, systemic affects (i.e., macroaggressions) can be seen in instances of disproportionate police brutality, inequitable educational and healthcare experiences, and biases in the judicial system (Williams et al., 2021). The insidious nature of microaggressions has devastating and long-lasting affects; it is because of this that attention to microaggressions should not only be prioritized, but also integral to conversations regarding diversity, equity, and inclusive praxis.

[Image description: Graphic of a person leaned over, resting their head on their fist, disintegrating into pieces.]

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[3]See: Brody et al., 2018; Din-Dzietham et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2013; Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Hurd et al., 2014; Huynh, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; Keith et al., 2017; Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014; and Williams et al., 2018a, 2018b.

Disruption: Microinterventions

It should be made clear that in cases where minoritized individuals are confronted with microaggressions—or any other form of oppression or discrimination—they may choose to speak up to disrupt and disarm the perpetrator; however, minoritized individuals are not obligated to teach or correct. The priority in these situations should be oppressed individuals' self-care and self-protection (Sue et al., 2010). While inaction in these situations may result in feelings of guilt or helplessness, what is most important is self-preservation. Affinity groups and community care are ways for oppressed individuals to seek and sustain healing.

Alongside this narrative, true accomplices who find themselves in opportune positions to disrupt microaggressions should be ready and willing to do so. Addressing these unconscious messages requires microinterventions (Sue, 2007a). Microinterventions involve three strategies:

1. **Make the hidden, perceivable.** Often the perpetrator is unaware that they have engaged in demeaning or offensive comments, so you have to make that perceivable to them.

2. **Educate the perpetrator.** Shift the focus from what the person intended to the impact. Often when you turn to a person who engages with a microaggression and you point it out to them, they say, 'That wasn't my intention at all. Why are you so sensitive?' You lose the argument when you focus on intention because you can't prove intent. Focusing on the impact as influenced by its significance gets the perpetrator to understand what happened and how they might have caused pain.

3. **Disarm the microaggression.** Steering the conversation away from a problematic remark or joke communicates that it's offensive. You'd be modeling good behavior to other people present, and you can have a later conversation with the person about why the joke was inappropriate.

Related Resources

[Image description: Photo of a lightbulb laying on a surface, with the words "learn more" written next to it.]

Acknowledging Difference and Disrupting Systemic Oppression is Inclusive, Not Divisive

There is currently a national debate surrounding what can and cannot be taught in K-12 public schools. In this Equity Dispatch we remember that centering equity and being able to recognize, name, and address the history of systemic racism and oppression in the United States is inclusive, not divisive.

Ally & Accomplice: Two Sides of the Same Coin

In this edition of *Equity Dispatch*, we explore the concepts of allyship and accomplice, and how they may manifest at the intersection of education and advocacy.

BBC Ideas - How I Deal with Microaggressions at Work

A short film for BBC Ideas, discussing the daily racial microaggressions that Black people face in the workplace.

Eliminating Microaggressions: The Next Level of Inclusion | Tiffany Alvoid | TEDxOakland

Microaggression is a term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group.

EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable: Identifying and Disrupting Your Whiteness: A Workshop Addressing Power & Privilege toward Anti-Racist Spaces

The term "whiteness" refers to race privilege, a way of seeing the world, and "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg, in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Whiteness is often unrecognized - particularly by people who identify as White - but pervasive in American society, and a barrier to inclusion and equity.

This *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*, facilitated by Equity Fellow Dr. Sharon Radd, offers a space to examine one's "personal, local, and immediate" (Singleton, 2005) connections to whiteness and privilege, and consider how to identify and disrupt rather than perpetuate them.

How Microaggressions Affect Children | A Parent's Guide on Race & Racism | PBS KIDS for Parents

Microaggressions are subtle gestures, comments, and biased behaviors towards marginalized groups. Dr. Renee Wilson-Simmons, Executive Director of the ACE Awareness Foundation, provides examples of microaggressions children experience in the classroom and ways parents can help.

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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