

*“I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.” – Helen Keller*

## **MICROAGGRESSIONS**

### **How Our Beliefs and Attitudes Can Harm**

Microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, put-downs, invalidations and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with people who may be unaware of their impact. Microaggressions are reflections of implicit bias or prejudicial beliefs and attitudes beyond the level of conscious awareness. Social psychologists have studied implicit bias for decades, along with the role it plays in human behavior. Almost any marginalized group can be the object of microaggressions. There are racial, gender, LGBTQ and disability microaggressions that occur daily to these groups (Sue, D.W, 2021, Scientific American)

### **Basic Mechanisms**

- We are socialized in families, institutions, communities and societies in which there exist strongly held beliefs and attitudes associated with race, sexual orientation and religion, as well as many other social identities and groups
- None of us are exempt from learning or “inheriting” the biases of our surroundings. Therefore, we may be socialized with racist, sexist, and heterosexist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors
- Most of us like to think of ourselves as overall good, moral, and decent human beings, yet all possess biases. This realization may be troubling, so we may deny, diminish, or avoid viewing ourselves as biased or prejudiced
- Our attitudes and beliefs may lead us to actions that oppress and discriminate against others, though we experience a lack of awareness at the same time

### **Characteristics of Microaggressions**

- Subtle, unintentional, and indirect: usually delivered by individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct
- Can be communicated verbally and/or behaviorally
- Arise from unconscious/ingrained and biased beliefs and attitudes
- Usually are “explained away”
- Are more likely to occur when people pretend not to notice differences and thus believe and react as if oblivious to their actions
- May have long term emotional/psychological damaging consequences on the recipient

## Types of Microaggressions

<p><b>Microassault</b></p>	<p>Conscious, overt, intended to be clearly derogatory</p> <p>More likely when offender is</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In the presence of others who share their beliefs and tolerate offender’s actions, or</li> <li>2. Able to be anonymous</li> </ol> <p>e.g., Using racial epithets, displaying white supremacist symbols—swastikas, or preventing one's children from <u>dating</u> outside of their race</p>
<p><b>Microinsult</b></p>	<p>Usually unconscious, seemingly unintentional</p> <p>Verbal or behavioral</p> <p>Subtly rude or insensitive, “hidden” message</p> <p>e.g., An employee who asks a co-worker of color how they got their job, implying they may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system</p>
<p><b>Micro- invalidation</b></p>	<p>Usually unconscious, seemingly unintentional</p> <p>Communication that negates thoughts, feelings or reality of target group</p> <p>e.g., “I don’t see color”</p> <p>“I’m not racist – I have several Black friends”</p> <p>A white manager responds to a Black employee’s comment, “A most articulate and surprisingly insightful explanation”</p>
<p><b>Environmental Microaggression</b></p>	<p>May be unconscious, seemingly unintentional</p> <p>Characteristic or feature of a place, event or institution</p> <p>Sends message of microassault, insult or invalidation</p> <p>e.g., Sports teams that use Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos</p> <p>Messaging that depicts only one race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.</p> <p>A university with buildings only named after wealthy, white, heterosexual, cisgender men</p>

## Racial Microaggressions

- It is not “old fashioned” racism that is most harmful to **Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)**, but the contemporary forms known as *modern racism*, *symbolic racism*, *aversive racism*, and *racial microaggressions*
- **Four psychological dilemmas:**
  1. **Clash of racial realities:** The racial reality of the BIPOC community is different from the racial reality of white Americans (e.g., “That person isn't racist, they don't treat me that way. I think you misunderstood them, they didn't mean it like that”)
  2. **Invisibility of unintentional expression of bias:** Perpetrators of a microaggression are usually sincere in the belief they acted without racial bias (e.g., I don't see color, I was raised to treat everyone the same”)
  3. **Perceived minimal harm of racial microaggressions:** When individuals are confronted with their microaggressive behaviors, the perpetrator usually believes that the individual impacted has overreacted and is acting overly sensitive and/or petty (“You're just being overly sensitive, Why are you playing the race card?”)
  4. **The Catch-22 of responding to microaggressions:** The action of both responding and not responding to microaggressions takes an emotional/psychological toll on the recipient (i.e., damned if I do and damned if I don't)

## Microaggressions Across Identities

- Although microaggressions are generally discussed through the lens of race and racism, any marginalized group within our society is susceptible:
- **Gender Identity and Expression**
  - **Expressions of heteronormative bias:** use of the pronoun “he” or the term “guys” – rather than “she,” “they,” etc, or “folks,” - to refer to all people = hidden message: the male experience is universal; female and gender non-conforming people's experiences are invisible
  - **Deadnaming:** the act of calling a transgender person by their name assigned at birth, as opposed to how they identify now = hidden message: I don't respect your identity or support your transition
  - **Misgendering:** the act of using incorrect pronouns when speaking to a trans or gender fluid person = hidden message: I don't wish to put forth the effort to respect your identity or make the necessary personal change to do so
- **Sexual Orientation**
  - Expecting a person who identifies as Queer to have a certain personality or interests based on stereotypes perpetuated by pop-culture = hidden message: I don't see you as complex individual composed of your own interests and experiences
- **Religious or Spiritual**
  - Wishing strangers “Merry Christmas” = hidden message: Christianity is the dominant religious status
- **Disability or Physical Difference**
  - Telling a person with a disability or physical difference how much you admire their courage = hidden message: it must be so hard and awful to be you
- **Social Class**
  - Describing lower class individuals as “trash” or “white trash” = hidden message: people of a particular socioeconomic or cultural background are unsophisticated and of no inherent value

## You Can Take Action

- In the words of Dr. Derald Wing Sue (2010, 2020), **the first step in eliminating microaggressions is to make the “invisible”: visible.** Individuals must become aware of the range of messages, values, and beliefs that they have internalized and how these may unconsciously guide their interactions with oppressed/target groups and how subtle, unconscious bias can manifest in their own behaviors and interactions
- **Raising awareness of microaggressions begins at the individual level:**
  - Individuals must become aware of the biases/stereotypes they have internalized about people of differing races, sexuality, nationality, age, etc.
  - Individuals must become aware of their own sexist beliefs and behaviors as a result of their own biases and stereotypes
- **Take responsibility for your own microaggressions:**
  1. Remain vigilant and stay aware of your own biases and fears
  2. Keep in mind the effect of your words and behaviors on individuals who differ from you
  3. Remain open to discussing your own attitudes and biases and how they may unintentionally impact others in subtly demeaning ways
  4. Recognize and avoid being defensive
  5. Be an Ally: stand up and speak up against all forms of bias and discrimination
  6. Education (see resources below as a starting point)
- **Microinterventions:** “The individual actions that ordinary citizens can take to voice disapproval, educate others and pressure those in authority to make changes” Sue, D.W. (2021)
  - Could be something as small as making empathetic eye contact with a Black colleague when a white manager microaggresses by praising them for their “surprisingly articulate” comment
  - Or it could be more direct — e.g., asking to hear a Latinx colleague’s viewpoint after a white manager has repeatedly ignored and talked over her in a meeting

## Resources

S. Giegerich (2021). Derald Wing Sue Offers Strategies to ‘Disarm and Dismantle Racism and Bias.’ Retrieved from: [Newsroom | Teachers College, Columbia University](#)

[Derald Wing Sue Offers Strategies to ‘Disarm and Dismantle Racism and Bias’ | March | 2021 | Newsroom | Teachers College, Columbia University](#)

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Sue, D.W. (2021). *Microintervention Strategies: What You Can Do to Disarm and Dismantle Individual and Systemic Racism and Bias, 1<sup>st</sup> edition*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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