Microaggressions
Liberty for All or Only for Some?

Microaggressions are everyday slights and snubs directed toward marginalized groups due to their disability, gender, race, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. Although these snubs can be intentional or unintentional, they communicate hostility toward others. Such negative messages demean people and convey messages of being lesser human beings (Sue, 2010). Examples include disregarding needs of individuals with disabilities, prioritizing men over women, discriminating against individuals because of their religious practices, and showing bias against individuals due to their perceived or actual sexual orientation. Many microaggressions occur subconsciously without the aggressor ever understanding consequences faced by victims. Aggressors usually consider themselves honest, respectable people with strong egalitarian values (Sue et al., 2007); they do not intend to assault, insult, or invalidate anyone. Their aggression stems from unconscious beliefs or implicit biases.

Microaggressions have been stratified into three different forms. Sue et al. (2007) constructed a taxonomy of microaggressions, including microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are more blatant, as they are the only microaggressions considered to occur consciously. Microassaults—verbal or nonverbal attacks intended to hurt victims—include purposeful name calling, avoidance behavior, or discriminatory acts (Sue et al., 2007). I experienced a glaring microassault during the final year of my physical therapy program. My joint mobilization instructor created a competitive game for us to play during class. He separated our class into two groups; one group was labeled “The White Guys,” comprising White students. The other group was labeled “The Janitors” and comprised students of color. We, the students of color, marched to our dean’s office with fury. We took his attack seriously and insisted on him being fired. He maintained his innocence, yet the university eventually dismissed him. His attack was blatant, but microinsults and microinvalidations are inadvertent.

Microinsults are unconscious rudeness or insensitive acts that devalue victims. These insults can be disguised as positive statements, such as telling a Muslim individual “Merry Christmas.” The hidden message reveals an unconscious belief about religious standards. I was microinsulted a few weeks ago. My work schedule recently changed due to my academic demands, and I ran into a physician whom I had not seen in some time. He joyfully greeted me and inquired about my obvious absence. I told him I was enrolled in a rigorous academic program and he asked, “Oh, are you in a master’s program?” He assumed. Matriculating through a master’s program is a huge achievement for anyone to celebrate, but why did he assume I was pursuing a master’s degree? Why not assume a doctoral degree? Better yet, why not simply ask me what type of program I was in? Assuming can cause us to make poor decisions. When we assume, we disregard others’ truth.

Microinvalidations are considered more destructive, as these unconscious aggressions reveal disregard or negative thoughts, feelings, needs, and experiences of marginalized groups, denying their subjective worldview. Revisiting my microassault story, our dean recommended we “try not to take it too seriously.” Her response catapulted us into the provost’s office, as we needed to seek higher authority. It was important for us to pursue the matter unapologetically. The dean’s words pierced us as deeply as the microassault itself; she invalidated our abhorrent experience. Reality is an amalgamation of endless perspectives; everyone has a unique worldview. Rejecting individuals’ worldview sends a message that their perceptions, experiences, and truths do not matter, and can subject them to psychosocial distress.

Experiences of microaggressions are linked to anxiety and anger caused by stress from repeated exposure to innocuous interactions between victims and aggressors (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). One interaction may be minimally impactful, but repeated attacks can precipitate mental health disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Sue, 2010; Swann, Minshew, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2016). These psychological consequences can burden day-to-day life for victims by altering their worldview and creating trust issues, leading to a psychological conundrum. Victims who experience these seemingly innocuous attacks report feeling frustrated and having challenges with self-esteem.
Guest Editorial

(Sue, 2010). We should be more aware of how our assumptions, values, and truths impact our engagement with others. We are at risk of committing microaggressions by doing the following:

- assuming individuals who are disabled have other less obvious impairments (denial of ability);
- telling individuals with mental illness that their perceived discrimination is part of their mental illness (denial of experiential reality);
- believing employers treat men and women equally (denial of discrimination against women [Sue, 2010]);
- believing you do not see color when you look at a person of color (denial of historical racism and privilege [Sue, 2010]);
- pathologizing homosexuality and diverse gender expression (promotion of heterosexism, nullifying a person’s identity [Swann et al., 2016]); and
- believing everyone in society has an equal chance at success (denial of systemic forces impacting poverty, educational achievement gaps, health care disparities, and unemployment differences [Sue, 2010]).

When we commit microaggressions, we are at risk of causing or exacerbating emotional distress and psychosocial hurdles for other individuals.

No one is exempt from committing microaggressions; it is impossible to separate ourselves from society’s historical facts. We are born into biases and must give ourselves permission to suspend our assumptions and accept other people’s truths. Doing so will free us from passing judgement and unnecessary criticism. Now that we are knowledgeable, what are we going to do? Will we walk in liberty for all or carry the burden of being informed aggressors?

REFERENCES


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