

Microaggressions and Relational Harms in the Workplace: What They Are and What to Do about Them? Part 2

The term “racial microaggression” was coined by Chester M. Pierce in the 1970s to refer to the “subtle, cumulative, mini-assaults” that characterize contemporary racism whose purpose is to keep marginalized peoples “in their place.”¹ By naming them “micro” he didn’t mean to suggest that the harm was trivial. Rather he meant that they were *daily* occurrences. Since then, the phenomenon of microaggressions has been studied by social scientists and found to be every bit as problematic as overt racist confrontations. In fact, the very subtlety of a microaggression rather than decreasing its harmful impact may add to it.

In the 2000s, Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D. and his colleagues began using the term microaggression to refer to “the everyday slights, insults, put-downs, invalidations and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned 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. Almost any marginalized group can be the object of microaggressions. There are racial, gender, LGBTQ and disability microaggressions that occur daily to these groups.”²

Here are a few examples of microaggressions:

- A physician’s assistant remarks to a Latina patient, “My, you’re very articulate!” as if the patient is defying an expectation that she would not be.
- A physician talks loudly to a patient with a visual impairment as if he thinks one disability implies others.
- A nurse practitioner who has been asked by a patient to refer to them as “they” pointedly uses female pronouns.

Many people wonder what the difference is between an insult and a microaggression. Microaggressions are specifically tied to a facet of a person’s identity that they cannot change; they occur repeatedly so that the impact is cumulative not singular; and, because they are subtle and carry an implicit, as well as an explicit message, they are often hard to de-code. It is not uncommon for a person who experiences a microaggression to face a quandary: “Did that really happen?”; “Did that person understand what they were doing?”; “What do I do now?” In Part 1, I discussed actions that a person who commits a micro-aggression can take to repair the harm caused by the comment, even if there was no intent to harm. It is the person who receives the microaggression who determines the impact, not the person who makes the statement.

In this handout, I am putting forward some ideas related to next steps the person who experienced the microaggression can take.

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1. There is no one-size-fits-all best way to respond to a person who commits a microaggression. Although it may be frustrating to read, “It depends,” it does. It depends on many factors of which these are a few:
 - a) Your personality: How big a risk taker are you? How comfortable are you with conflict? How comfortable are you with direct communication?
 - b) The position you were in when the microaggression occurred: Was it directed at you? Did you witness a microaggression? Was it aimed indirectly at a group of which you are a member?
 - c) Your workplace culture: Has your workplace discussed microaggressions and there is a clear policy regarding the importance of acknowledging and repairing them? Or, has your workplace not discussed microaggressions? Does your workplace lack policies or procedures -- formal or informal -- to assist people in talking to a person who commits a microaggression?"
 - d) Your role in the organization: Is your status in the organization protected? Would you be concerned about negative repercussions were you to approach the person who committed the microaggression and request acknowledgment and repair?
2. Now that we have those considerations under our belt, what actual next steps can a person take? In 2019, Dr. Sue and his associates published an important article codifying actions that those who are targets of micro (and macro) aggressions, allies, and witnesses can take to confront and disarm the people who make these hurtful statements and to render visible the dynamics of the microaggressive content. They define microinterventions as “the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates to targets of microaggressions (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone....”

The strategic goals of microinterventions are to (a) make the ‘invisible’ visible, (b) disarm the microaggression, (c) educate the offender about the metacommunications they send, and (d) seek external support when needed.”³

In their article they give examples of microinterventions in each of their categories. An example of making the ‘invisible’ visible is to name and make explicit the microaggressive metacommunication in a comment. “When you say, ‘we hired you because we thought you could connect to your community,’ you are implying that I did not get my job because of merit.” An example of disarming the microaggression is to

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directly say to the person, “I don’t agree with what you have said and in fact it offends me.” There are many ways of soliciting external support including reporting the incident, if your workplace has a mechanism for doing so; confiding in a trusted colleague; or joining a support group.

Diane Goodman has created a practical list of categories to address the person who commits a microaggression.⁴ Her suggestions range from confronting by asking for clarification, “Can you say more about what you mean by that?” to using humor or sarcasm, “I play like a girl. You mean I play like Serena Williams?” to telling them they are too “smart” to put forward a stereotyped comment like that, “Well, you’re a very intelligent person so you fully understand that such a comment doesn’t sit well with me as a woman” to telling the person how their comment made you feel, “When you said that, I felt that you were indirectly devaluing not only me but my culture.”

No matter what you decide to do or, upon reflection you decide not to do – because it isn’t safe to directly confront the person who commits a microaggression – the process of awareness and decision-making about next steps will take a toll on you. It is exhausting and stressful to process microaggressions. Given that, self-compassion and self-care are crucial. For many people, living in a world in which microaggressions occur will be a lifelong challenge. Pretending that they don’t matter or that they don’t take a toll is a fool hardy long-term management approach. Acknowledging that microaggressions take a toll and that therefore you are unfairly burdened by having to manage them can be a kind commitment to yourself.

In the best of all possible worlds, we all work in organizations and institutions in which there have been explicit discussions of microaggressions and the commitment that the workplace has to eliminate and address them when they occur. In the best of all possible worlds, management takes the position that it is an act of altruism when someone confronts a person who has committed a microaggression and a precious opportunity given to the perpetrator to learn how to become more attuned to the meaning of and impact of their words and actions. In the best of all possible worlds, perpetrators of microaggressions are grateful for the opportunity to learn and change. In the best of all possible worlds, people who confront a person who has committed a microaggression feels listened to, acknowledged, appreciated, and respected for their coming forward. In the best of all possible worlds, everyone who was there when it happened and when the conversation ensued, feels better that relational harm was attended to and repaired.