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AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

What is a microaggression?

- Term coined by Professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970
- Often occurs in interpersonal communication
- They are cumulative over time
- Racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Wing Sue et al, 2007, p. 273)

Types of microaggression

Can focus on multiple social identities including race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, nationality, body size, health, ability, language, social class, and others

- **Microassaults**
- **Microinsults**
- **Microinvalidation**
- **Environmental microaggressions**

Classroom Impact of Microaggressions

Students who encounter microaggressions by professors or peers may:

- Drop the course - officially or unofficially
- Act out – no longer value or respect course instructor
- Feel academically and/or personally excluded
- Experience emotional, psychological, and social stressors that accumulate over time, and can lead to depression, high blood pressure, and social isolation

Classroom Strategies for Eliminating Microaggressions

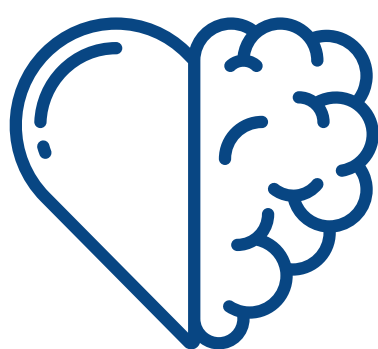
- Use and require use of inclusive language
- Provide space for counternarratives through readings, examples, experiences, assignments, and feedback
- Minimize stereotype threat at every opportunity
- Don't make assumptions about student experiences
- Praise persistence
- Be an ally, champion, mentor, and listener

Communication Responses and Interventions

- Repeat comment back with clarification – What do you mean by that?
- Did you mean to say [insert insulting offense]?
- When you say [insert microaggression], I hear you saying [insert insult].
- Did you mean for that comment to be hurtful/exclusionary/insulting?
- I don't think you meant to insult me, but have you thought about how [insert microaggression] is tied to racist/colonial/sexist/homophobic ideas?
- That's an ouch for me! Explain why the statement was hurtful

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Students who experience microaggressions are at risk for reduced participation, diminished academic performance, and decreased persistence (DeAngelis, 2009). Whether intentional or not, microaggressions can result in negative consequences. While microaggressions can seem like small slights when compared to overt racism or if viewed as singular events, a lifetime of exposure to microaggressions can silence, invalidate, and humiliate those who experience them (Sue, 2010).



IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Repeated microaggressions can lead to low self-esteem and a sense among students that they do not belong. Research shows that students who are repeatedly exposed to racial microaggressions develop fatigue, cynicism, and anger (Sue, 2010).

IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Students of color report anger, fear, and anxiety in response to microaggressions experienced regularly in the classroom. These responses and the constant stress caused by microaggressions also create cognitive disruption which then impacts students' level of engagement in course content and assignments, abilities to perform at full capacity on tests and quizzes, and their connections to instructors and fellow students in the course (Sue 2010).



IMPACT ON PHYSICAL HEALTH



Microaggressions impact students by sapping their energy and diverting cognitive processing for adaptive functioning and problem-solving (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions have been known to cause health concerns such as increased blood pressure and depressed immune system (Reynolds et al., 2010).

1/2 OF STUDENTS IMPACTED

Half of all students have reported experiencing bias while at college (Boysen, 2012). These forms of bias include overt forms such as racial slurs, and more subtle forms of bias including slights and insults.



Recognizing and appropriately responding to microaggressions may help in delivering effective instruction and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed in your class.



What Are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are statements, actions, or incidents regarded as an instance of indirect or subtle discrimination against members of a marginalized group, often resulting in harmful consequences to those groups (Sue, 2010). Such communication can occur both verbally and nonverbally and is often unrecognized and unintentional. In 1969, psychiatrist and Harvard University Professor Emeritus Chester M. Pierce originated the term “microaggression” to describe the daily insults and slights that he observed non-Black Americans directing to Black Americans. Since then, the definition has expanded to include any marginalized group member, including race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or religion (Johnson & Johnson, 2019).

The term “micro” is used because these interactions happen at the individual level as opposed to the prejudice or discrimination that is embedded in social systems, institutions, and policies and that affords a privilege to some at the expense of others based on various identities (Williams, 2020). An example of systemic discrimination is environmental racism; for instance, poorly treated water is supplied to a largely Black or African American city while predominately White neighborhoods receive properly treated water (Steinberg, 2021).

The “micro” in microaggression does not mean that these acts are of little consequence or can't have life-changing impacts; they can and do. Scholars such as Dr. Ibram X. Kendi “argue that the term ‘microaggression’ diminishes the cumulative harm of the abuse. Microaggressions are, simply put, aggressions” (Runyowa, 2015). Microaggressions have significant consequences for the target of the microaggression and the cumulative effects are often life-altering (Sue, 2010).

Research has shown that repeated microaggressions can lead students and staff to feel devalued and their academic and workplace performance to be negatively affected (Cardoza et al., 2017). Nadal (2013) reported that the cumulative effect of microaggressions on members of the LGBTQ community was attributed to feelings of suicidal ideations, depression, higher rates of substance abuse, and an overall sense of victimization.

Unlike overt acts of prejudice, racism, and discrimination, microaggressions are subtle verbal and behavioral actions that many people do not even realize they are making. Although it may be more difficult to recognize microaggressions, it does not mean that the negative consequences of their impact are any less severe; they are often as damaging as overt acts of racism and exclusion (Nadal, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000).

Who Commits Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are often committed by people who have learned biased attitudes and stereotypes that are embedded in social systems, institutions, and the media (Sue, 2010). The subtlety of microaggressions is what can make them difficult to identify and address, often for



both the person perpetuating negative stereotypes and biased attitudes and for those who experience them (David, 2014). Many who commit microaggressions remain unaware of having done so and, on a conscious level, view themselves as fair-minded people who would not purposely commit a microaggression (Sue, 2010). This adds to the difficulty of challenging microaggressions, as people who commit microaggressions do not want to view themselves as people who hold beliefs of superiority and inferiority about race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct. . . . These everyday occurrences may, on the surface, appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights,” but research shows they have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of marginalized groups and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care, education, and employment. (Sue, 2010)

The table below, based on the work of D. W. Sue (2010), includes examples of microaggressions and the underlying messages they send. Please [review this chart](#) for added examples of microaggressions.

Microaggression	Underlying belief, prejudice, or stereotype
Congratulating a Black student or colleague for being articulate and well-reasoned.	This statement expresses and perpetuates the stereotype that Black students and staff are not articulate or well-reasoned, or not as articulate or well-reasoned as White students or staff.
Saying to a student or colleague, “You speak such good English,” and further, “But you speak without an accent,” so, “Where are you really from?”	This microaggression is perceived by marginalized groups as offensive and invalidating because these statements reflect a view that racial and ethnic minorities are aliens in their own country.
Continuing to mispronounce a student or colleague’s name after having been corrected or using a nickname they have not asked you to use.	This microaggression communicates that the name, and therefore ethnic and/or racial identity of the student or staff member, is inconvenient and not worthy of the time or effort it may take to learn to pronounce appropriately, demeaning their ethnic or racial identities or heritage.



Recognizing Various Forms of Microaggressions

In recognizing microaggressions, it is important to note that they can be spoken, written, and/or environmental (Lilienfeld, 2017). These factors may not be entirely under your control, but how you respond to and approach microaggressions when they do arise can make a significant difference to the targeted student, staff member, or group, as well as bystanders.

Spoken Microaggressions

Although microaggressions may include covert comments that are demeaning to a person’s identity, they also include slights of rudeness and insensitivity (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Written Microaggressions

Microaggressions may appear in class and meeting materials, cocurricular and campus literature, or other written communications. It is helpful to be mindful of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes as you create curricula, policies, and procedures, but it is equally important to be mindful as you post statements, ideas, articles, and other materials (Sue, 2010).

Environmental Microaggressions

Environmental microaggressions may not be under your control; however, recognizing them and appropriately responding to them can significantly reduce their negative impact. Environmental microaggressions may include the lack of diversity in pictures of students, faculty, and staff in course-related material, campus literature, and institutional marketing material.

The table below shows examples of microaggressions that can be spoken, written, or environmental.

Form of microaggression	Examples of microaggressions
Spoken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to mispronounce or making jokes of people’s names • Misgendering (saying he instead of she or they) or deadnaming (using a former or birth name without permission) • Assigning tasks based on assumed or stereotypical strengths/weaknesses • Speaking of Western or European values, beliefs, or perspectives as the <i>correct</i> way instead of as one way and not the only way



Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing or posting statements that invalidate the experiences of marginalized students, staff, or groups, for example, “post-racial America” • Sending written communications to individuals that disregard their preferred pronouns
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buildings with stairs-only access and no ramps, which exclude people with wheelchairs, strollers, or who otherwise have difficulty climbing stairs • Buildings or places that are named after people who symbolize racial or ethnic injustice to marginalized students or groups

Understanding the Impact of Microaggressions on the Campus Community

Microaggressions can be found in all aspects of campus life for students, staff, faculty, and leaders. For example, a male staff member may speak over a female staff member and receive recognition for an idea that she was initially promoting, intimating that her ideas are not valued because of her gender, or a Black male student at a prestigious university may be asked which sport he plays, with the assumption that would be the reason he would have been admitted and not due to his academic credentials, or a Latinx student may be asked “Where are you from?” and when replying, “Utah,” the aggressor says, “No, where are you from, from?”

Members of the educational community who experience microaggressions are at risk for reduced participation, diminished academic and job-related performance, and decreased persistence (Assensoh, 2020).

Microaggressions can have the following impacts on the recipients:

- fatigue, anxiety, fear, and resentment
- depression and anger (Sue, 2010)
- health concerns such as increased blood pressure and depressed immune system (Nadal, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2010)
- disengaging from environments where microaggressions occur (Nadal, 2013)
- lower student and staff retention rates (Assensoh, 2020)

It is important to note that the regularity of microaggressions experienced by members of marginalized groups creates a cumulative effect that heightens the level of stress recipients



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experience (Sue, 2010). At their root, microaggressions communicate to the target person or group that they do not belong, are not trustworthy, and are inferior or abnormal (Sue, 2010).

Recognizing, preventing, and appropriately responding to microaggressions are necessary steps to ensure that students, staff, faculty, and leaders feel safe and valued as educational community members. These practices will aid in promoting an inclusive environment and enable greater student and staff success.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS



REDUCING MICROAGGRESSIONS



BELONGING

The feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group. It extends beyond being welcomed, but is the genuine sense of being known, heard, and valued (Malone, 2022).

BYSTANDER

A person who is present in a situation but does not take part or intervene (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and/or religious slights and insults to the target person or group (University of Pittsburgh, 2022). The "micro" in microaggression does not mean that these acts are of little consequence or can't have life-changing impacts; they can and do.

PERPETRATOR

A person who expresses a microaggression toward another person or group.

TARGET

A person or group who is the recipient of a microaggression.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS



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