

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

The term “racial microaggression” was coined by Chester M. Pierce, MD in the 1970s to refer to the “subtle, cumulative, mini-assaults” that characterize contemporary racism whose purpose is to keep groups that have been historically marginalized “in their place.” 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 subtleness of a microaggression, rather than decreasing its harmful impact, may add to it.

Here are a few examples of microaggressions: A physician assistant remarks to a LatinX 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.

Originally the term was used solely as Dr. Pierce used it in the context of race. Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D. and his colleagues began using the term microaggression in the 2000s 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.”¹

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? Do I have the energy to confront the person? How likely is it they will tell me I am being hyper-sensitive, that they meant nothing by it, and they will not engage with me in a meaningful way about the impact of their comment on me?” Each interaction that consists of a microaggression toward a person from a historically marginalized group carries a long sequence of further considerations for the victim of the microaggression that is time-consuming and emotionally draining. The playing field is not even! Nor are the long-term effects of microaggressions evenly distributed. Research has shown that microaggressions are a constant source of stress and humiliation in the lives of those who are subjected to them. They impact well-being, impede workplace and academic performance, and negatively affect physical health.

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In 2019, Derald Wing Sue and his associates published an important article codifying actions that targets of micro (and macro) aggressions, allies, and bystanders 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.”²²

Since microaggressions stem from unconscious biases toward people who are different from us, it is inevitable that any of us, even if we are from a historically marginalized group, may commit a microaggression. When we do, if we become aware of it, we can choose to make amends. If we are fortunate enough to be made aware of having committed a microaggression, we are then also given an opportunity to repair the harm we have caused.

For those of us who commit microaggressions, these are a few steps we can take to repair and make amends to the persons we have harmed, whether they were the target or a witness/bystander.

Outwardly, to the persons who have been harmed:

1. I can acknowledge that I have made a comment that was denigrating, invalidating, insulting or in some way caused distress and harm.
2. I can apologize for it.
3. I can ask if they would like to tell me what the impact of my comment was on them.
4. I can listen non-defensively and ask questions of clarification only if I have not understood something that was said.
5. If they have shared their experience with me, I can ask if they would like to hear what I have understood.
6. I can let them know that I will reflect on my behavior and let them know what steps I intend to take to learn from the experience.

For my own education and growth:

1. I can reflect on why I said what I said or did what I did. Some questions that may help me include:
 - a. What did I learn growing up that has created the lens I am using to see people who are different from me?
 - b. What is happening in my life now that supports the lens that enables me to commit microaggressions?
 - c. Where can I turn to look for support for the attitudes and behaviors I would prefer to embody?

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2. I can stay connected to the people I have harmed even if I am embarrassed by my actions.
3. I can read and listen to people who have a lot to teach me about bias and prejudice.
4. I can use the privileges of my position – if I have any – to be an ally to people who have less privilege than I.
5. I can respond with compassion to myself and others who are on this never-ending journey called life.

¹ Sue, D.W. (March 30, 2021). Microaggressions: Death by a thousand cuts. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/microaggressions-death-by-a-thousand-cuts/>

² Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296> P. 134