MICROAGGRESSIONS IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

WSU Graduate School
Presented by Donyale R. Griffin Padgett, Ph.D.
Associate Professor - Diversity, Culture & Communication
WSU, Department of Communication
September 8, 2017
Microaggressions are commonplace

• Almost all cross-cultural encounters are prone to microaggressions
  • Each of us has the potential to commit microaggressions in our daily interactions with others
  • We are often unaware that we engage in this kind of communication
Today’s talk will help us understand:

- What microaggressions are
- Common examples of microaggressions
- Negative effects of microaggressions
- What we can do to be more conscious of our behavior

**microaggression**

Brief, everyday indignities that are verbal, behavioral or environmental, that they may be intentional or unintentionally communicated to women, to people of color, to gay/lesbians that have an insulting message behind them that often time causes severe psychological distress and harm.
What are microaggressions?

• “Fleeting comments that seem innocent but leave uneasy feelings behind.”
  - “I too am Harvard” student project
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAMTSPGZRiI

• “Acts done with little conscious awareness of their meanings and effects.”
  - NYT March 2014

• “Intentional and unintentional slights against any socially marginalized group.” - Fast Company magazine 2014
What the research says...

- **Commonplace, usually unintentional, negative slights and expressions of bias toward socially underrepresented and marginalized groups** (Diane Goodman, Ed.D.)

- Harvard Professor Chester Pierce coined the phrase in the 1970s

- Professor Derald Wing Sue, Psychologist at Columbia University (NYC) has pioneered work in this area
  - Sue’s definition: "Everyday slights, indignities and put-downs that marginalized populations experience in day-to-day interactions with people"
  - Can also be nonverbal (slights and bias carried out through gestures, facial expressions, use of physical space, etc.)
What we need to know

• Microaggressions accumulate over the course of our lives
  • Stem from a place of unconscious bias

• **Difficult to communicate** their occurrences with individuals who don’t share similar identities and cultural experiences

• Goes well **beyond workspaces** to schools, communities and our homes
Common examples of Microaggressions

• In his book, Sue (2010) outlines common examples of this kind of behavior, including (but not limited to):
  • Assuming inherent abilities or qualities
  • Assuming homogeneity
  • Ascription of intelligence
  • Alien in one’s own land
  • Denying personal bias
  • Ignoring or denying difference
  • Myth of meritocracy
  • Environmental microaggressions
Examples of Microaggressions

• 1- Assuming inherent abilities or qualities
  • Assumptions about what others are like based on their social group/race/ethnicity/class/gender identity, etc.
    • Eg. Assuming that the Asian person in your certification class is good with math; Relegating women to certain jobs because of assumptions about physical or emotional ability;
    • Eg. A professor commenting in class about black women and hair extensions, braids and using a student as an example

• 2- Assuming homogeneity
  • Assuming that all people from a certain group are alike; not acknowledging individual difference.
    • Eg. Disregarding ethnicity by assuming all Latin people are Hispanic – Asking a Latina (Columbian) to explain Cinco de Mayo (Mexican holiday). Comments like “they all look the same”
Examples of Microaggressions

• **3- Ascription of Intelligence**
  
  • Assumptions about a group’s intellectual ability, competencies and capabilities
  
  • SCENARIO (From Fast Company Magazine article)
  • A female CEO of a start-up that analyzes text performance recalls coming from academia to a corporate setting was a culture shock. In her second week, she saw that Microsoft was offering a math talk. Her first degree was in math. She walked over a few minutes early to see two men sitting in the room. One saw her and immediately asked if she was looking for the design talk across the hall.
  
  • **What happened here?**
  • The female CEO majored in math in school, but the men had assumed she was in the wrong room.
Examples of Microaggressions -2

3- Ascription of Intelligence (continued)

- More examples:
  - Speaking more slowly and simply to a person with a physical disability (who is not cognitively impaired)
  - Not encouraging women to pursue STEM fields (relegating them to helping industries, teaching, and support roles)
Examples of Microaggressions -3

• 3- Alien in one’s own land
  • Being perceived as a perpetual “foreigner”
    • Eg. Teacher doing introductions in the class and insisting from a person with ethnicitiy/ies, “So, where are you really from?”; Saying “You speak good English”
Examples of Microaggressions -4

• 4- Denying personal bias
  • Unwillingness to admit individual prejudice or discriminatory behavior
  • Eg. Saying “I’m not homophobic, that was a joke!”; or “I can’t be racist, some of my best friends are Black”; or “That wasn’t a slight against you as a woman, I respect women”
Examples of Microaggressions

• 5 - Ignoring or denying difference
  • Unwillingness to acknowledge or admit seeing a person’s social identity (and more importantly, the significance of it)
    • Eg. The infamous line: “I don’t see color, I just see people.” or telling a co-worker with a physical disability “I don’t see you as a person with a disability; I just see you as ‘special’”
    • Ignoring the social significance of race, class, gender, etc. as an important feature of a person’s identity and as a factor in our interactions
Examples of Microaggressions -4

• 6- Myth of meritocracy
  • Assumption that all groups have equal opportunity and that there is a level playing field. A person’s success or failure is due to individual effort and attributes (Blame the victim)
    • Eg. “I had no problem finding a job. You must not be trying hard enough.”
    • Eg. “I just don’t understand why those people didn’t evacuate after Hurricane Katrina. If they had told me to leave, I would have been gone!”

• 7- Environmental microaggressions
  • Negative messages or cues from the organizational environment
    • Eg. Having only pictures of white people or men on the walls; Company’s online presence is void of diversity
    • Eg. Offensive images in event promotional flyer
What’s trending?

• A photographer at Fordham Univ. asked people to write down microaggressions they’ve experienced

• https://www.buzzfeed.com/hnigatu/racial-microagressions-you-hear-on-a-daily-basis?utm_term=.hi227Zab#.raV6xGEQ
Negative effects of MA

- Detrimental to the persons on the receiving end of MA because they impair performance
  - A national generational study concluded that 6 out of 10 employees leave their jobs because of negative factors in the workplace like microaggressions (Center for Generational Kinetics)

- The subtle nature of MA creates and sustains inequities because they are usually not addressed

- They reflect an unwillingness to see the taken-for-granted assumption of privilege that keeps us from recognizing marginality and inequities in our environment
Negative effects of MA -2

• Perhaps the most damaging effect of microaggressions is what these slights communicate to those individuals being offended.

• Examples:
  • Your individuality doesn’t matter.
  • “___________ people are all alike.”
  • I don’t have any bias.
  • Identity doesn’t matter.
  • Your experiences with inequality don’t matter.
Addressing and eliminating MA

• There is an urgent need to bring greater awareness to MA
• Need to understand how they operate and the impact they can have on people who are most vulnerable to these slights
  • Some ideas:
  • Consider providing opportunities for individuals to share personal narratives, better understand each other’s unique and complex histories, and work together on creating a more meaningful and respectful [campus] environment
Addressing and eliminating MA

• Some questions to increase our own awareness of interactions that may involve microaggressions

• We have to start asking ourselves:
  • What values am I communicating here?
  • How might the other person interpret my response?
  • Am I being aware of potential bias that may exist?
  • If so, what might I do differently to either correct it or make sure it doesn’t happen next time?
Addressing and eliminating MA -2

• We can:
  • Become more aware of our own unconscious bias
  • Ask questions like: “Where do you think that was coming from?” when you experience a microaggression
  • Help people understand how a comment made you feel
  • Educate others and speak up in our environments
  • Initiate opportunities with others who might be different
  • Be observant and notice how people react to our communication (behavior, style, etc.)
  • Know when to address slights when we see them enacted
  • Listen when concerns are raised
  • Own it; apologize when people bring offenses to our attention
Parting Questions:

1. Define microaggressions in your own words and give an example of one type of microaggression.

2. Use the microaggression example you gave for ques. #1 and write down its effect on an individual.

3. From what you have learned today about microaggressions, what is one thing you can do the next time you observe this behavior?
Sources

- Diane J. Goodman, Ed.D. – Trainer and workshop presenter on microaggressions nationally