

# Microaggressions at work – A Guide

This guide aims to promote awareness of microaggressions: what they are, how they can manifest and the impact they can have on people in the workplace. It is designed to encourage readers to keep an open mind, self-reflect and attempt to understand the perspectives and experiences of others.

## Microaggressions are...

incidents of everyday bias and discrimination towards groups that are disadvantaged as a result of institutional, historical and cultural ideologies, practices and beliefs. These groups are defined by a particular trait such as race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and disability.

Microaggressions have increasingly replaced more overt acts of discrimination. These subtle 'put-downs' can be considered ambiguous and thus more difficult to prove.

We do not always find it easy to accept that we may hold biases and act in discriminatory ways, even though social psychological research confirms the existence of unconscious bias in well-intentioned people. We prefer to see ourselves as decent human beings who uphold the values of equality. However, we are all born into a cultural environment and are influenced by ideologies, behaviours and values that effect the way we think and behave at the conscious and unconscious level.

## Types

Microaggressions can be verbal, non-verbal or environmental.

**Microinsults** are statements or behaviours where individuals unintentionally or unconsciously communicate discriminatory messages - subtle snubs - to members of minority groups e.g. omitting someone's title.

**Microinvalidations** are statements that deny or undermine the realities of members of various groups e.g. "I don't see skin colour: we are all part of the human race". This statement negates the experiences of people as racial/cultural beings and the importance of their racial experiences, including historical and current oppression within society. It assumes that race is not an important variable that affects people's lives.

## Examples

- Introducing one colleague with glowing accolades, the other with just their name;
- Complementing a native English speaker on their 'excellent use of English';
- Omitting someone's academic title;
- Asking someone from a minority ethnic background where they are from 'originally';
- Continually misusing pronouns even after the person indicates their gender;
- Continually interrupting someone;
- "What she's really trying to say is..";
- Calling someone by a nickname that they didn't share;
- Omitting someone from an important Communication or social gathering.
- Complementing someone on doing 'such a great job' when they are doing no better than anyone else. This may give the message you are setting lower expectations for them.
- Assuming someone from a particular group will represent the perspective of all members of that group;
- Mistaking a female doctor wearing a stethoscope for a nurse;
- A security guard monitoring a black customer more carefully than a white one;
- Avoiding sitting next to people from certain groups on the bus or train;
- Asking one specific person to take meeting notes where all roles are similar;
- Excluding from spaces e.g. a corridor with paintings of white men;
- Telling a student from an ethnic minority background that if they work hard they can succeed like everyone else. This statement undermines the existence of institutional barriers and racism.



"Since 2012, Black Lives Matter has worked to bring the routine and institutionalized violence against Black Americans into the national spotlight (Black Lives Matter 2016). Many white Americans have taken issue with the tagline itself, subverting it in the reply: "all lives matter." Proponents of this subverted tagline occasionally fail to see why it is a problematic response, regarding it as more morally inclusive. However, this tagline is a racist erasure of the very problems Black Lives Matter is addressing, namely that Black lives are not valued equally compared to white lives, and thus the very use of this subverted tagline constitutes a kind of harm. Given the impact of similar noninstitutional, interpersonal behaviors, such acts fall under a new moral category of harms resulting from oppression: microaggressions."

C. Friedlaender, 2018, On Microaggressions: Cumulative Harm and Individual Responsibility. In *HYPATIA Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Volume 33, Issue 1:p.5.

"[...] brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults" Sue et al 2007, Racial Microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. In *American Psychologist*, Vol. 62 No. 4, p. 271-286).



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## The cumulative effect of microaggressions



Being the recipient of a microaggression once in a while is not a problem. Occasionally being referred to as 'Mr' rather than 'Professor', or spoken to rudely can happen to people for all kinds of reasons. However, being continually and consistently exposed to these subtle messages can be *cumulatively* very devastating, despite each individual incident seeming to be innocuous and insignificant. Repeated messages that devalue a person can hinder their confidence and performance, develop feelings of self-doubt and isolation and have an adverse impact on mental health

As individual incidents are considered so small and innocuous, people are sometimes expected to "get over it", "toughen up" and "stop being so sensitive". While people in some cases are seen to over-react to a specific incident, it is important to remember that they may be reacting to 'cumulative harm', rather than an isolated incident; and while the reaction to a single event may seem disproportionate, responses may be in proportion to this cumulative harm. By treating a response to a specific single incident as unjustified, one treats the cumulative harm as non-existent, which can be incredibly disempowering for the individual who feels harmed.

If someone born in the UK from an ethnic minority background is continually complemented on their excellent use of English, or continually asked where they are from 'originally', the message being conveyed is that they are an outsider in their own country.

Persistent and invisible microaggressions reinforce structural relations of oppression by undermining those in oppressed groups and reinforcing those in positions of privilege.

*"I think it's helpful to think of micro inequities as causing a series of "tiny cuts" – each requiring a Band-Aid. Now imagine if during your work day, you saw colleagues with Band-Aids on them from time to time. And what if you started to see a pattern around who had them and who didn't. Some people have to endure these tiny cuts, while some people get away without a scratch."*

**Microaggressions can be explained away** by seemingly plausible reasoning. People who carry out microaggression are often unaware they are doing so. Microaggressions are usually invisible and frequently dismissed as harmless.

*"[...] a woman voices a valuable idea in a classroom and the professor later attributes that idea to one of her male peers. This act is attributionally ambiguous because, on the one hand, the professor may simply have been forgetful, but on the other hand, in later attributing the idea to a male student, the professor might have been reflecting an implicit bias against women's intellectual abilities. This ambiguity contributes to our current failure to take microaggressions seriously as moral wrongs."*

C. Friedlaender, 2018, On Microaggressions: Cumulative Harm and Individual Responsibility. In *HYPATIA Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Volume 33, Issue 1:p.5.

## Responding to microaggressions – Damned if you do and damned if you don't.



The inability to confirm or prove a microaggression took place creates 'psychological dilemmas': did it take place or was the action misinterpreted by the recipient? A rising criticism of political correctness means that microaggressions are even more difficult to address.

Different reactions to microaggressions have different consequences and the process of deciding how to respond stressful.

**Deciding to let it go** is common, as frequently it is not possible to determine with certainty whether the incident occurred and the recipient may be fearful of the consequences of responding. If the recipient doesn't respond, outcomes can include regret, growing resentment, stress, loss of confidence and damage to good relations between people from different groups.

**Responding with anger** can result in the recipient seen to have 'over-reacted' and to being 'oversensitive'. They may also be told that their reactions confirm stereotypes, for example a racial stereotype of the angry black women.

Microaggressions occur within a broader framework of cultural oppression. An act is a microaggression if and only if we can establish a link between the act and an objectively existing form of structural oppression. The relationship between

structural oppression and microaggressions lessens the problem of attributional ambiguity, making it easier to say when such an act has occurred.

*"When a microaggression occurs, the victim is usually placed in a catch-22. The immediate reaction might be a series of questions: Did what I think happened, really happen? Was this a deliberate act or an unintentional slight? How should I respond? Sit and stew on it or confront the person? If I bring the topic up, how do I prove it? Is it really worth the effort? Should I just drop the matter?" (Sue p. 279)*

## Tips for responding to microaggressions

It is important to seek support if you feel you may need it. Talking about an incident can help validate it for you.

Choosing whether you respond, and how, will depend on a range of factors including context, physical safety concerns, personality, career status etc. There is no 'right way' to respond.

In some situations, some people may choose to respond with a 'comeback' designed to disarm the microaggression and/or educate the producer of the microaggression. For example Professor Derald Wing Sue, a Chinese American professor of Psychology and expert on Microaggressions, when complimented by his students on his 'excellent use of English', responds with "*Thank you, I hope so, I was born here.*"

Some people who experience a microaggression may prefer to ask the person, in private, if they can provide feedback on the incident that may or may not have registered with the person.

As many acts of microaggression take place at the unconscious level and are unintentional, it may be a good idea to start the conversation with something like "*You may not have noticed ...*" or "*You probably didn't mean it but ...*"

Describing the behaviour using non-evaluative, behaviour-based language may also be helpful. For example "*I noticed when I began speaking you let out a big sigh and rolled your eyes,*" rather than "*I noticed when I began speaking that you completely dismissed me.*" You could then describe how this impacted on you using 'I' statements (e.g. "*I felt hurt when you said that*") instead of accusing statements (e.g. "*You are a racist*").

A good idea could be to ask the person to interpret their own behaviour, preferably by asking questions such as, "*Did you notice it?*"; "*Is that what you meant?*"

It might also be helpful to thank the person for listening to your feedback and being open to change.

If you feel that talking to the person directly may have a negative effect on your career, you may decide to find a leader who can be your ally and who can correct the person on your behalf.

It might be a good idea to keep a document of each incident in case it becomes a pattern.

## Tips for responding to a claim you carried out an act of microaggression

It is important to be open about hearing how what you may have said or behaved may have hurt someone, rather than immediately try and defend what your intent was.

For the person who approached you, it is most likely not the first time they may have perceived an incident like this happening which has ignited similar feelings in them.

Maybe try and be open to the possibility that, unintentionally, you may have acted in a biased manner and reflect on how the other person may have perceived your action.

Some people who are exposed to microaggressions feel they don't have the energy to initiate a discussion about the event. This does not mean the incident didn't have an impact on them. Be mindful of cues, such as eye-rolling or sighing, as these may signal that you have unintentionally committed a microaggression.

## Summary - Microaggressions:

- Are subtle acts of discrimination that can remain invisible;
- Are carried out by individuals who are often unaware that they are doing so;
- Have a cumulative impact with recipients continually exposed to similar incidents;
- While the reaction to a single event may seem disproportionate, responses may be in proportion to 'cumulative harm';
- Can be devastating despite seeming to be innocent and insignificant;
- Can be 'explained away' by what seem to be valid reasonings with recipients told to 'let it go';
- Can happen to anyone. However, they occur more frequently to people from disadvantaged and or minority groups;
- Create psychological dilemmas and stress: did a microaggression just occur or am I being over-sensitive?

