

Microaggressions: a guide

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1. What are Microaggressions?

Professor Chester M Pierce, a Harvard Psychiatrist originally coined the term 'Microaggression' to describe the *"insults and dismissals which he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflicting on African Americans"* (Wikipedia).

Although the term originally related to racism, a modern, wider definition is offered by Derald Wing Sue, a Professor of Counselling Psychology at Columbia University. Sue describes microaggressions as:

"the everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that members of marginalized groups experience in their day-to-day interactions with individuals who are often unaware they have engaged in an offensive or demeaning way".



Small behaviours, Big Impact

Death by a Thousand cuts

Commonplace:

Microaggressions can be encountered in a range of everyday settings; in your own home and from the moment you leave the house.

Subtle:

Overt discrimination is the undeniable, obvious stuff: aggressive and openly hostile. Microaggressions are often covert; less obvious and hard to name, define, grab hold of...but they are just as harmful.

Important context to understand before we move on:



Microaggressions are often linked to Unconscious or Implicit bias where our brains make quick judgments about people and situations, influenced by our background, environment and experiences. We may or may not be aware of these views or of their impact. This can lead to people forming stereotypes about marginalised groups which then come out in the microaggression. We need to acknowledge and understand this. To understand more about some of your own biases you can take this short test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>



There is a theory called the Straw Man effect that enables us to avoid accountability. For example, the person accused of the microaggression creates a distorted version of the original issue (a Straw Man), making it easier to refute and discredit what they were originally being challenged on.



Cognitive Dissonance *“In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values; or participates in an action that goes against one of these three, and experiences psychological stress because of that.”* (Wikipedia)

For example, you may view yourself as open minded and committed to equality. However, if you are being challenged on something that you have said or done (a microaggression) your brain doesn't like this as it goes against who you 'think you are'. As a result we minimise or excuse behavior to lessen this friction: *“It wasn't that bad” “It was misunderstood” “They are making a fuss”*.

2. Examples of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional but what we need to focus on is the **Impact** they have.

The concept of 'intent' is not straight forward as the person responsible for the microaggression may or may not be aware of the hidden messages being communicated within what they have said or done. As we discussed above, Unconscious Bias can play a role here. However, this does not absolve responsibility, as although it may have been unintentional, the impact for the person experiencing it is significant.

Below are some examples of microaggressions (most of these are experienced by our staff and students). It is important to remember that these can be Intersectional. This means that an individual may belong to/identify with one or more group and experience microaggressions related to being part of these. For example, a Black female colleague could experience microaggressions based on her ethnicity and her gender. It is also crucial to acknowledge that just because we have experienced oppressive behaviour such as microaggressions, it does not mean that we will not ever do this ourselves.



Watch this video, which gives some more insight into racial microaggressions in the workplace.

Reflect: have you ever witnessed, experienced or been responsible for microaggressions?



Examples

Microaggressions experienced by Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people:

- Continually having a name pronounced incorrectly with no effort to get it right.
- Being mistaken for the only other Black male in the office.
- Being silenced when bringing up issues related to race i.e. the renaming of the Wills Memorial Building.
- Being told “you are well spoken and articulate” in a slightly surprised tone.
- Being asked “where are you really from” - an assumption that you are not British.
- Having an idea dismissed or ignored and then a White person makes the same suggestion and is given the credit.
- A non-Black person saying “can I touch your hair” or touching a Black person’s hair.
- Being the only person asked to produce workplace identification in a group of White colleagues.

Microaggressions experienced by Women:

- An assertive female manager being labelled as ‘Bossy’ while her male counterpart is described as a ‘Good leader’.
- Being interrupted or talked over during a meeting on several occasions and made to feel that your contribution is not valued.
- Being mistaken for being in a role more junior than the role you hold.
- Labelled as ‘getting emotional’ when talking passionately or challenging something in a workplace setting.

Microaggressions experienced by Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Trans and other sexual orientation and gender identities (LGBT+):

- Being told “you don’t look Trans”.
- Being told “you don’t act Gay”.
- An assumption that you will be friends with/get on with a colleague who also identifies at LGBT+.
- Making no effort to use the correct pronouns, even when you have been asked to.
- An assumption that as a Bisexual, you will not be monogamous.

Microaggressions experienced by Disabled people:

- Being told “you don’t look disabled”.
- Being told “we all get depressed sometimes, chin up”.
- Assuming you need assistance instead of asking; for example, pushing someone’s wheelchair or guiding someone with a Visual Impairment without asking them if they need assistance.
- Being told “You are so inspiring for overcoming your Disability”.

What is the impact?

As discussed above it is important to separate Intent from Impact. Microaggressions may appear less offensive and harmful than the overt forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and more – they are not. Brushing off multiple microaggressions everyday; in the shop, on the bus, in work, with friends, at the gym and the list goes on...takes its toll.

On top of this is a reality that if someone experiences a microaggression and speaks out, they could be told they are “*overreacting*” being “*too sensitive*” or “*making it up*”. They could be labelled as a ‘*trouble maker*’ ‘*aggressive*’ or worry about the impact of speaking out on work relationships, progression...again, the list goes on. So, on top of having to deal with multiple microaggressions (which if you are not from a marginalised group – you don’t encounter) they are then not heard, and their feelings about what has happened are invalidated – this adds to the trauma. We know that our staff and students experience microaggressions and we also know that this impacts mental and emotional wellbeing.

Some common responses when microaggressions are challenged....



I doubt that's
how it was
meant



They are a
good person....



Maybe you got
the wrong end
of the stick



It won't
be to do
with their race,
her sexuality,
his disability
though...

4. What can you do?

In the workplace it is likely that you will either witness, experience or be responsible for a microaggression. Here are some tips to manage these situations:

If you experience a microaggression:

- If and only if you feel comfortable, you could speak to the person at the time or after it has taken place. You could clarify what they meant by the behaviour and explain the impact, asking them not to do it again.
- The **very important point** is that you shouldn't have been put in the situation in the first place. If you don't feel comfortable or don't want to discuss with them you could seek support from a trusted colleague, [staff networks](#), line manager and/or refer to our [Stand Up Speak Out](#) webpages for further advice and guidance.

If you witness a microaggression:

- We have developed an online learning resource, in our Inclusion Essentials training; Challenging Unacceptable Behaviours which provides information, tools, and techniques to encourage staff to [challenge all forms of unacceptable behaviour](#) including microaggressions.

Things that you can do to avoid being responsible for a microaggression:

- Check your unconscious bias/stereotypes and consider these before you speak/act.
- Learn about the experiences of people from marginalised groups so you are aware of the issues faced – there is no definitive reading list, please use Google and our [Staff Inclusion Webpages](#).
- Reflect on thoughts/assumptions you have and try to unpack these – come from the stance that they are most likely rooted in unconscious bias and stereotypes rather than being true.
- Rephrase or rethink comments or just don't say them if in doubt...
- Listen to colleagues, friends, family if they chose to share experiences of oppression with you – learn from this and use it to promote inclusive behaviour.

If someone tells you that you are responsible for a microaggression:

- **Don't get defensive**, take a minute to notice your defensive reaction and just sit with it for a moment – politely ask for a couple of minutes if you need it.
- **Listen** – allow them to have the space to tell you what happened and don't interrupt, make faces, or 'hear' your version of it – **REALLY LISTEN**.
- **Acknowledge and accept** that you have caused hurt.
- **Apologise and be accountable**.
- **Learn** – don't do it again. Read, listen, watch videos, listen to podcasts and DO BETTER. And please remember that it's not other people's job to educate you – it's your job.

Useful resources:

Staff Inclusion Webpages: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/inclusion/>

Disrupting Racism programme for staff and other learning and development opportunities: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/inclusion/learning--development/>

Harvard Implicit Bias test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

Pearn Kandola Podcast: [Micro-incivilities, their impact on individuals](#)

Pearn Kandola Webinar: [Micro-incivilities in the workplace](#)

[Unconscious Bias Guide](#)

We have used and adapted content from the following sources:

Let's talk about Microaggressions, 2019, Deya Mukherjee

How I deal with microaggressions at work, viewed June 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ideas/videos/how-i-deal-with-microaggressions-at-work/p07sc5vb>

Managing Micro-incivilities in the workplace webinar, June 2020, Pearn Kandola

How to respond to microaggressions, NY Times online article, viewed June 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/smarter-living/how-to-respond-to-microaggressions.html>

BME Attainment gap report, 2017, Bristol SU: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sraa/Website%20bme-attainment-gap-report.pdf>

Advance HE website, viewed June 2020: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/employment-and-careers/unconscious-bias>

Wikipedia, viewed June 2020: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microaggression>

If you have any questions or would like this guide in an alternative format please contact diversity-inclusion@bristol.ac.uk

