

4

Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression

An Introduction

Derald Wing Sue

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment. Any marginalized group in our society may become targets: people of color, women, lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/transgendered people, those with disabilities, religious minorities, and so on.

The most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group. These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights,” but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups and affect their standard of living by creating inequalities in health care, education, and employment.

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

- A White man or woman clutches her purse or checks his wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.)
- An Asian American born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking “good English.” (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A Black couple is seated at a table in the restaurant next to the kitchen despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front. (Hidden message: You are a second-class citizen and undeserving of first-class treatment.)

GENDER MICROAGGRESSIONS

- An assertive female manager is labelled as a “bitch,” while her male counterpart is described as “a forceful leader.” (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken for a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men.)

- Whistles or catcalls are heard from men as a woman walks down the street. (Hidden message: Your body/appearance is for the enjoyment of men. You are a sex object.)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION MICROAGGRESSIONS

- Students use the term "gay" to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized. (Hidden message: People who are weird, strange, deviant, different are "gay".)
- A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she is "into women." The therapist indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once had a client who was "into dogs." (Hidden message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)
- Two gay men hold hands in public and are told not to flaunt their sexuality. (Hidden message: Homosexual displays of affection are abnormal and offensive. Keep it private and to yourselves.)

As indicated previously, microaggressions can be based upon any group that is marginalized in this society. Religion, disability, and social class may also reflect the manifestation of microaggressions. Some of these examples include the following.

- When bargaining over the price of an item, a store owner says to a customer, "Don't try to Jew me down." (Hidden message: Jews are stingy and money grubbing.)
- A blind man reports that people often raise their voices when speaking to him. He responds by saying, "Please don't raise your voice; I can hear you perfectly well." (Hidden message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning.)
- The outfit worn by a TV reality-show mom is described as "classless and trashy." (Hidden message: Lower-class people are tasteless and unsophisticated.)

MARGINALITY AND OPPRESSION

Microaggressions reflect the active manifestation of oppressive world views that create, foster, and enforce marginalization. To be confined to the margins of existence in mainstream life is to be oppressed, persecuted, and subjugated; denied full rights of citizenship; imprisoned or trapped to a lower standard of living; stripped of one's experiential reality; and restricted or limited as to life choices. Oppression can occur through imposition or deprivation. In both cases, they span a continuum from its direct/concrete nature to those with more symbolic or psychological manifestations and from being consciously perpetrated to being unintentional, indirect, and subtle.

IMPOSITION

Oppression by imposition, force, coercion, and duress . . . can be anything from bullet, a bludgeon, shackles, or fists, to a penis, unhealthy food, or abusive messages designed to cause or sustain pain, low self-efficacy, reduced self determination, and so forth. . . .

Most of us can immediately recognize the horror and heinous nature of overt and concrete acts of rape (imposition of physical and psychological abuse), murder (taking away life), and unjust imprisonment as obvious forms of injustice and unfairness visited upon individuals and groups. . . . Good, moral, and decent folks do not condone such actions. Yet, acts of oppression by imposition or force *through microaggressions* can be many times more harmful to racial/ethnic minorities than hate crimes.

The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients. The definition of oppression includes imposing “abusive messages” (microaggressions) that both reflect and perpetuate false beliefs. Those beliefs cause humiliation and pain, reduce self-determination, confine them to lesser job roles and status in society, and deny them equal access and opportunities in education, employment, and health care. Most of the pain and detrimental impact comes from ordinary, normal, decent people who believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of justice for all. They are unaware of their biases and prejudices but act them out in the form of microaggressions.

DEPRIVATION

Oppression can also take a second form—that of deprivation. It can be seen as the flip-side of imposition and involves depriving people of desired jobs, and education, health care, or living conditions necessary for physical and mental well-being. Food, clothing, shelter, love, respect, social support, or self-dignity can be wrested from any marginalized group. In our history, we once banned the Sioux nation from practicing their spiritual and religious traditions, deprived them of their lands, and took away their dignity as Indigenous people in their own country. Taking away a group’s humanity and integrity through forced compliance is a very common practice directed toward marginalized groups. . . . When nursing home attendants address their elderly residents as “sweetie” and “dear,” they are unaware of how these microaggressive terms belittle and infantilize the elderly and how they deprive them of their roles as capable and competent adults. “Elderspeak” has been identified as a very harmful and humiliating form of microaggression and can result in a downward spiral for older persons, low self-esteem, withdrawal, and depression.

FORMS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions may take three forms: (1) microassault, (2) microinsult, and (3) microinvalidation. . . .

MICROASSULTS

Microassaults are conscious biased beliefs or attitudes that are held by individuals and intentionally expressed or acted out overtly or covertly toward a marginalized person or socially devalued group. They differ from the other two forms of microaggressions (to be discussed shortly) in that the perpetrator harbors conscious bias toward an identified and socially devalued group. This bias may be directly and publicly expressed through racist, sexist, or

heterosexist statement (using racial epithets or making catcalls toward women, for example) or acted out in any number of ways (preventing a son and daughter from dating or marrying outside of their race, giving second-class service to a woman, and so on). In extreme forms of microassaults, LGBTs may experience teasing and bullying in schools, isolation, physical violence, hate speech, and anti-LGBT legislation. . . .

MICROINSULTS

Microinsults are also forms of microaggressions, but they differ significantly from microassaults in that they likely occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator. These are either interpersonal interactions (verbal/nonverbal) or environmental cues that communicate rudeness, insensitivity, slights, and insults that demean a person's racial, gender, sexual orientation, or group identity and heritage. Microinsults are subtle snubs often unconsciously disguised as a compliment or positive statement directed towards the target person or group. The contradictory communication starts with what appears to be a positive statement but is undermined with an insulting or negative metacommunication.

For example, an African American student who has done outstanding work in his economics class is told by the professor, "You are a credit to your race." On the conscious level, the professor appears to be complimenting the Black student; while on the other hand, the metacommunication contains an insulting message: "Blacks are generally not as intelligent as Whites. You are an exception to your people." This type of microinsult does several things: (1) it disguises a racial bias or prejudicial worldview of the perpetrator; (2) it allows the perpetrator to cling to the belief in racial inferiority, albeit unconsciously; and (3) it oppresses and denigrates in a guilt-free manner.

Microinsults can take many other forms. For example, they can occur environmentally. Men who display nude pictures of women from *Hustler* or *Playboy* magazines in their places of employment (offices, desks, locker rooms, etc.) may be unknowingly contributing to sexual objectification. The hidden message is that women's bodies are not their own and they exist to service the sexual fantasies of men. The impact is to strip women of their humanity and the totality of their human essence (intelligence, emotions, personal attributes, and aspirations) and to relegate them to being only sexual beings. Environmental microaggressions are generally invisible to those in the majority group but quite visible to those groups most disempowered. . . .

MICROINVALIDATIONS

Microinvalidations are similar to microinsults in that they generally occur outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. However, this form of microaggression is perhaps the most insidious, damaging, and harmful form, because microinvalidations directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups. They accomplish this goal through interpersonal and environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences of the target group.

Color blindness, for example, is one of the most frequently delivered microinvalidations directed toward people of color. It can be defined as an unwillingness to acknowledge or admit to seeing race or a person's color. Such an orientation is predicated on the mistaken

belief by many Whites that "not seeing color" means they are unbiased and free of racism. As a result, many Whites engage in defensive maneuvers not to appear racist by either pretending not to see color or by actively avoiding any discussions associated with race. Despite studies indicating that race and gender are two of the most easily identifiable qualities seen by people, color blindness and gender blindness inundate our everyday interactions. "There is only one race: the human race." "When I look at you, I don't see color." "We are all Americans." "Regardless of your gender or race, I believe the most qualified person should get the job." Such statements and their orientation serve to deny the racial, gender, or sexual orientation reality and experiences of these groups. . . .

THE CATCH-22 OF RESPONDING TO MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations, place socially devalued group members in an unenviable position of (1) trying to ascertain the motivations behind the actions of perpetrators and (2) deciding whether and how to respond. Since many microaggressions are likely to be delivered unintentionally and their real motives are not conscious to the perpetrator, they are usually filled with double meanings and/or are very ambiguous. On a conscious level, dominant group members who engage in unconscious microaggressions believe they are acting in an unbiased manner, complimenting the target, or making a rational decision. When a statement such as "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" is made to a female job candidate, the job seeker is caught in a double bind: On the one hand, the statement is valid and reasonable, but on the other hand, experience has shown the woman job hunter that it can be used to justify not hiring women and offering such positions to male candidates. When students of color are seldom called upon by a White professor to answer questions, is this a random act, or is the professor operating from an unconscious assumption that minorities are less likely to have intelligent comments or answers to class problems? The term "attributional ambiguity" has been given to motivational uncertainty in that the motives and meanings of a person's action are unclear and hazy. Studies suggest that attributional ambiguity depletes psychological energy by diverting attention away from other important tasks (problem solving in classrooms and work productivity in the workplace).

Second, a catch-22 is often induced in the recipient of microaggressions. The conflict involves how to respond to the person when a remark or action conveys a demeaning insult of offense.

In the face of an offensive group-specific comment, the target is placed in a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" situation. That is if the person does nothing, he or she may suffer from a sense of low self-esteem, a feeling of not being true to the self, and a loss of self-integrity. Yet, to confront the perpetrator or to raise the issue may result in negative consequences. . . .

Ever present in the awareness of marginalized group members is the power differential that generally exists between perpetrators and targets. Should a Latina/o student who is the target of microaggressions from fellow White students or even from the professor raise the issue? In this case, the Latina/o student may be outnumbered in the class by fellow White students who will be unable to see the microaggressions; they may become defensive, or they may see the Latina/o student as oversensitive. Additionally, the power differential becomes especially clear if a White professor is involved. Questions and thoughts likely to race through the mind of the student include: "Will the professor be offended?" "Will the professor think less of me?" "Will I get a poor grade in his or her class?" "Maybe I should just do nothing and let it go."

Readings for Diversity and Social Justice

Fourth Edition

Edited by

Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld,
D. Chase J. Catalano, Keri "Safire" DeJong,
Heather W. Hackman, Larissa E. Hopkins,
Barbara J. Love, Madeline L. Peters,
Davey Shlasko, and Ximena Zúñiga

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Fourth edition published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2018 Taylor & Francis

The right of the editors to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Routledge 2000

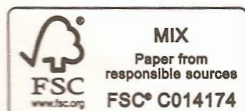
Third edition published by Routledge 2013

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-05527-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-05528-5 (pbk)

Typeset in Swiss 721 and Classical Garamond
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

Visit the companion website: www.routledge.com/cw/readingsfordiversity



Printed and bound in the United States of America by Sheridan

Section 1

Introduction

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

Section 2

Introduction

Content

9

10