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THE DETRIMENTAL IMPACT OF MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

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In many workplaces today, the following situations are not uncommon: an assertive female manager may be labeled “a bitch” while the same behavior lends her male counterpart the description of an “effective leader,” a gay man may avoid displaying a picture of himself and his partner/significant other because it may be perceived as “flaunting” their sexuality, or an Asian American employee, born and raised in the United States, is often complimented for speaking “good English.”

Statements that offend or make individuals uncomfortable are called microaggressions. In the book, *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* (Sue, 2010), microaggressions are defined as “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” (p. 3). Invariably, these comments carry a “hidden” message that demeans their recipients, makes them feel they are lesser beings, suggests they don’t belong, and even relegates them to an inferior status. Perpetrators are usually unaware of the “hidden” message that is also being delivered. In the case of the assertive female manager, the idea is that women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers. Homosexual displays of affection are often labeled abnormal and offensive and, therefore, should be kept private. Asian Americans are perpetually made to feel like foreigners in their own country.

Scholars (in Sue 2010) have identified three forms of microaggression:

Microassaults:

These 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. An example of such microaggression would include all the recent anti-LGBT legislation. The case of Mathew Sheppard, the gay, University of Wyoming student who was tortured, beaten, and tied to a fence to die by two homophobic men is another example. In cases of microassaults, there is a strong belief in the “inferiority” of members of the target/devalued group.

Microinsults:

These types of microaggressions often occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator. They are transmitted either verbally or nonverbally, or even through environmental clues. The impact is often an insult or slight delivered to demean the recipient’s racial, gender, sexual orientation, or group identity. Microinsults tend to be disguised as compliments or positive statements. For example, when a manager praises the only African American team member for her excellent contributions to the IT department (e.g.: “You are a credit to your race”), unconsciously, the message being transmitted is that, for the manager, Blacks are not as intelligent as Whites and the employee is an exception to her group. When a company displays pictures of its all-White, male CEOs, the message being communicated is that women and employees of color do not belong in leadership positions.

Microinvalidations:

Similar to microinsults, perpetrators are often unaware of their impact. This form of microaggression, though, is considered the most damaging and harmful because they **not only** represent a direct attack, but they also deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups. Color blindness is a common microinvalidation directed toward people of color. Many Whites believe that not seeing color means they are unbiased and free of racism. However, pretending not to see color and deliberately avoiding discussions associated with race is a privilege that Whites have. This privilege not only contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, but it also prevents Whites from taking the responsibility of addressing the many societal and organizational inequities that are still in place.

The Impact of Microaggressions in the Workplace

It is very clear that, in today's workplace, different groups are still experiencing different realities. While men, for example, may hold on to the belief that the most qualified candidate will inevitably rise to the top, women's experiences are very different. Sexism continues to prevent women from rising to top managerial positions, women's contributions are often not recognized in the workplace, women are not promoted even when fully qualified, and we all have seen the impact of the proverbial "glass ceiling." Many Whites today, especially after the election of President Obama, do believe that racism is no longer a significant problem. Blacks and other marginalized groups, however, continue to report incidences of prejudice and discrimination.

Microaggressions are indeed common occurrences in the workplace. In the recent Women in the Workplace report from LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co, the authors highlighted the gender-based microaggressions women are still facing. Results showed that 64 percent of the women indicated having experienced microaggressions. Women frequently have to provide more evidence of their competence than men, and often have their judgment questioned even in their area of expertise. They are also twice as likely than men to be mistaken for someone in a more junior position. Black women are dealing with a greater variety of microaggressions and a larger number of them indicated having their judgment questioned in their area of expertise. They also indicated being asked to provide additional evidence of their competence. Results were even more alarming for Lesbian women: 71 percent of them indicated having been the recipient of microaggressions. In fact, lesbian women are far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks in the workplace about themselves or others like them. They are also far more likely to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work.

For many marginalized groups, addressing microaggressions puts them in a "catch-22" situation. If they do nothing, they end up suffering from a sense of low self-esteem, a feeling of not being true to their self, and a loss of self-integrity. Yet, to confront the perpetrator may result in negative consequences. The sad reality is that most marginalized individuals choose to do nothing, especially if there is a power differential between perpetrators and their targets. It is not uncommon for those in the receiving end of insults or offensive remarks to be asked to "let it go" or "get over it"; after all, the comment was "innocent" and made with "no-harm intended." These expectations only serve to deny the harmful impact of the inflicted biases.

The impact of microaggressions in the workplace is devastating for all concerned. When left unaddressed, they enforce marginalization, deny equal access to opportunities, and invalidate the way oppressed groups experience their own reality. Because most individuals see themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, acknowledging their own biases and discriminatory practices will, most certainly, contradict the way they see themselves. Consequently, they avoid discussing their microaggressions, which, in turn, only serves to discourage others from addressing the same issues. The end result: it preserves the self-image and innocence of the oppressor, silences the voices of the oppressed and, most troublesome, it prevents existing inequities from being addressed. While anyone can be on the receiving end of disrespectful behavior, microaggressions are more often directed at those with less power, such as women, people of color, and LGBTQ people.

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Concluding Thoughts

Overwhelming evidence shows that microaggressions have major consequences for marginalized groups: it contributes to a hostile work environment, devalues social group identities, lowers productivity, perpetuates stereotype threat, not to mention all the physical and mental health problems they cause. Persons of color, LGBTQs, women, people with disabilities and other marginalized groups are still “subjected to chronic, continuing, and daily microaggressive stressors from well-intentioned individuals who are unaware of the insults, slights, and demeaning actions they visit upon these groups.” (Sue, 2010, p. 15).

While many individuals truly believe they are nonprejudiced, hold egalitarian values, and would never deliberately discriminate, the reality is that these same individuals harbor unconscious biases that often result in discriminatory actions. When they continue to see themselves as individuals who stand for equality, justice, and respect for everyone, this distorted self-image prevents them from confronting their prejudices and discriminatory actions. Consequently, they don't have to acknowledge having acted in a racist, sexist, or heterosexist manner. Dominant group members who engage in unconscious microaggressions do believe they are acting in an unbiased manner and even complimenting their target. Make no mistake, though. Microaggressions are far from insignificant slights; they are oppressive and harmful to the wellbeing of many groups in our society. Whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions signal disrespect and inequality.





Standing Up for Inclusion

The impact of microaggressions

What do you do when someone you care about is the target of demeaning stereotypes? Knowing how to address others' comments or jokes that are biased, demeaning, or stereotypical is an essential skill to have.

Anyone can speak up when hearing a demeaning comment. In fact, a simple phrase or question on your part can turn the conversation from destructive to constructive. However, being an "ally," that is, speaking up on behalf on someone else, is not easy. The strategies on the side should help you.

Derrogatory comments make individuals feel

Invisible
Inadequate
Abnormal
Excluded

Which would you choose to be?

An observer
A witness
A bystander
An ally

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A few strategies for shifting the conversation

1. Assume good intent and explain the impact
I am sure you meant that joke to be funny, but that stereotype is no joke. Unfortunately, some people actually believe that.

2. Rephrase
"I am not prejudiced against colored people (outdated and bigoted). I just don't have any colored friends."

I am glad to hear you are not prejudiced against Asians/Asian-Americans. What has happened in your life that has kept you from having Asian friends?

3. Ask clarifying questions
*What do you mean?
What are you saying?
I didn't hear you correctly - what did you say?
What is it that leads you to say that?*

4. Repeat and Question
It sounds like you are saying that Brenda is too old to learn the computer. Is that what you mean?

5. Interrupt and Redirect
How many _____ does it take to? Whoa, let's not go there!

6. Seek contradiction
"Immigrants don't even try to speak English."

Actually, I've met dozens of immigrants who have learned English or are trying to learn it. Is there someone is particular you were trying to communicate with? You sound frustrated.

7. Provide feedback
When you made the "gay" comment in the meeting, I saw that John felt humiliated

Based on the book, Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts: Communicating Respectfully in a Diverse World by Leslie Aguilar