

CAITE

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

How to deal with Microaggressions

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What is microaggression?

Microaggression is 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults' (Yearwood, 2013: 2). Whilst racial microaggression is 'a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place'- Specifically directed to individuals of colour- microaggressions take the form of "verbal and non-verbal assaults in subtle automatic or unconscious forms, layered assaults based on race and its intersections with gender,

class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname' (Louis, et al., 2016:455).

When & where does it happen?

Microaggression can take place anywhere and at any time- not only is it a common occurrence, it also originates from various sources within the environment. 'It is so very common . . . It's almost a daily thing and after a while it makes you have to question yourself and wonder if you are being overly sensitive' (Louis, et al., 2016:465).

Few examples

Verbal microaggression	Non-verbal microaggression
"You all look alike"	Setting low expectations for students from particular ethnic groups
Failing to learn to pronounce or continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have corrected you	Touching their hair without permission
To an East Asian person: "Why are you all so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more"	Expecting students of any particular group to 'represent' the perspectives of others of their race in class discussions or debates
Asking a Black person: "Why do you all have to be so loud/ animated/aggressive? Just calm down"	Black Academic mistaken for a service worker
"When I look at you, I don't see colour"	A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of colour is on it
Making a joke about a person's name	A security guard following a Black person, presuming that they are going to cause damage or steal
"You are so articulate"	Not sitting next to a person of colour on the bus
"You are in England, so speak in English"	
"There is only one race, the human race"	

Impact of microaggression

- Concerns exist that repeated exposure to these erosive communications over time results in an accumulation of negative messages that impact self-esteem and self-concept.
- When we experience microaggressions, we may feel invalidated, invisible, misunderstood, disconnected, marginalized, and alienated.
- We may also start to struggle with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, stress, negative self-concept and view of the world, suicidal thoughts, health issues and low academic performance.

(Counselling & Psychological Services, 2021)

Coping mechanisms

Importantly, research shows that it is difficult for targets to cope because they must acknowledge some factors, i.e., (1) a microaggression has taken place, (2) did it happen because the aggressor is bias? and (3) what are the consequences of addressing the aggressor. However, considering the angry 'Black woman stereotype' (such stereotypes include the myth of the angry Black woman that characterises people of colour as ill tempered, overbearing, aggressive, and hostile without provocation), people may have limited options to respond or cope with racial microaggressions (Ashley, 2014). Nevertheless, to decrease the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions, it is important to understand how to cope, or deal with it. Common coping strategies include positive thinking (understand that the aggressor is the one with a problem not you), silence and withdrawal (avoid the aggressor if you can), seeking social support and allies, and being assertive.

How can I deal with it?

Call It Out!

- Redirect the interaction with the goal of immediately stopping the conversation to prevent further harm from occurring
- Ask probing questions to the aggressor to help them understand their statements and actions and how they can be perceived as rude, threatening, or harmful
- In some cases, it might take a little longer to respond to it – it doesn't really matter. The fact that you still feel uncomfortable about it after some days shows that you need to speak about it. It is important you respond, particularly for your mental health.
- Ensure you do not approach the aggressor angrily. Might be difficult in some cases, particularly with a senior colleague. If so, give it sometime before approaching the person.
- Tell them exactly what you found offensive; when it occurred and why it was offensive.
- Ensure they do not brush it to one side – Emphasise the seriousness!
- It's not your duty to teach them how to change but theirs
- Notably, common response would be *"I didn't know, or it wasn't my intention to offend you"* But this should make no difference, you should respond by letting them know how you felt and why it should not be repeated!

Notably, this submission is by no means exhaustive. But it can be used as a starting point!

Bibliography

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