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www.equitysolutionsvt.com

802.451.0558 equitysolutionsvt@gmail.com

Introduction to Microaggressions

Microaggressions are:

“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative ... slights and insults” targeting people based on some part of their identity that is marginalized or oppressed.

(adapted from Sue et. al., 2007, “Racial microaggressions in everyday life”)

AND

- Often unintentional
- “Subtle” or rationalizable
- Creates harm for the target
- Connects to inequitable systems and history
- Can *only* exist in a context of systemic oppression

AND

More than “just hurt feelings”: microaggressions are deeply connected to historical and ongoing trauma that limits positive life outcomes for targeted people.

Microaggressions can target people based on:

- Race
- Low Socioeconomic status/generational poverty
- Gender
- Religion
- Ability
- Other parts of identity that are systematically marginalized/oppressed

We can interrupt our bias/assumptions that feed microaggressions by practicing vulnerability, reflection, and accountability. We can learn about experiences other than our own and think before we speak.

Examples of Racial Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<p><i>Alien in own land</i> When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born</p>	<p>"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English." A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.</p>	<p>You are not American You are a foreigner</p>
<p><i>Ascription of Intelligence</i> Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.</p>	<p>"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate." Asking an Asian person to help with a Math or Science problem.</p>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in Math / Sciences.</p>
<p><i>Color Blindness</i> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race</p>	<p>"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race."</p>	<p>Denying a person of color's racial / ethnic experiences. Assimilate / acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial / cultural being.</p>
<p><i>Criminality – assumption of criminal status</i> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.</p>	<p>A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.</p>	<p>You are a criminal. You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong / You are dangerous.</p>
<p><i>Denial of individual racism</i> A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases</p>	<p>"I'm not a racist. I have several Black friends." "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."</p>	<p>I am immune to races because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you.</p>
<p><i>Myth of meritocracy</i> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes</p>	<p>"I believe the most qualified person should get the job." "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."</p>	<p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and / or incompetent and need to work harder.</p>
<p><i>Pathologizing cultural values / communication styles</i> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant / White culture are ideal</p>	<p>Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud / animated? Just calm down." To an Asian or Latino person: Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." Speak up more." Dismissing an individual who brings up race / culture in work / school setting.</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>

How will I respond to bias and/or microaggressions?

based on a blog post by the Fabulous Apparatus Collective, 2007

Our decisions can be based on many considerations. If we have plenty of time to make a thoughtful decision, we might ask ourselves questions like:

- What is my relationship with this person? (Is the person a friend, a colleague, a stranger, a boss?)
- How much am I invested in this relationship?
- What is the power balance in this relationship? What do I have to lose?
- What is my goal here? Do I want the other person to learn something? Do I want to feel heard? Do I want to protect myself from being exposed to this bias/microaggression?

Based on our answers to questions like these, we choose from a wide range of possible responses. Being aware of our many options can help us to make choices we will feel good about. Some of the possible responses we choose from are:

Do nothing.

Walk away.

Change the subject.

“This is not interesting to me.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

Do nothing at the time. Write a note later.

Ask questions to make someone think or reflect, such as

What do you mean by (a particular word or idea)?

Where did you learn that (idea or assumption)?

Can you imagine that people might have a different perspective on that?

Suspend my immediate reaction; wait and see what happens next.

Check in with others in the situation – to compare perspectives, to check on your perceptions (“I’m not crazy, right?”), and/or to decide together what to do.

Talk to someone with more seniority than me. (ie. supervisor)

Step in as an ally. Or Recruit an ally.

Phone a friend!

Provide information or resources, in many different ways, such as:

Correct factual errors or Printed info sheet or Suggest other resources (website, books, ...)

Suggest someone else the person should talk to about it or “I have a different experience of that.”

Connect them with a relevant workshop

Offer a different explanation.

Question the basis or underlying assumptions.

“I’m sure you didn’t *intend* to be racist, *and* ...”

“When you say _____, I feel _____.”

“What is funny about that ‘joke?’” or “That’s not funny.”

Quote authority. (“Well, I read a book by Big Expert, and s/he said that this is about class.”)

“A lot of people think that. I disagree.” or “I need you to stop talking now.”

Yell, stomp, express anger.

Circle a few responses that you want to practice using! And, write in your own.

Interrupting Assumptions/Bias

One reason assumptions are harmful is that they are usually not random, but rather tend to align with widespread stereotypes, even if we don't consciously believe in them. For example, stereotypes about people in poverty as lazy or criminal might lead us to assume a client is not working as hard as they could. And, the racist stereotypes that are also widespread in our culture interact with class stereotypes, so that assumptions fall on poor people in different ways depending on race.

For example, the stereotypes of East Asians as a “model minority” and of Latinos as uneducated and non-English-speaking, may lead us to assume that an Asian client is more likely to follow through and succeed than a Latino client. Even though one of these seems like a “positive” stereotype, the assumption is still harmful to both clients/groups. It can lead us to assume some clients don't need as much help or resources as they may actually need, and that other clients don't deserve or won't benefit from resources.

Because assumptions are so often connected to stereotypes, the impact is more than individual. From a client or participant's point of view, it's not only that someone made an inaccurate guess about them, but also that it was the *same* inaccurate guess that many people have made about them throughout their life, and maybe also about their family members. This is often called a microaggression. This can raise the stakes of participating in a program and engaging in a relationship with service providers, because it can feel like the person must not only do their best for themselves and their family, but also overcome a service provider's expectations for them to be seen as a whole, complex and capable person.

TOOL: Ask yourself these 3 Questions to interrupt assumptions you are making

- What stories and stereotypes are behind the assumption I'm making?
- What barriers might be contributing to this person's situation?
- What is a more accurate, strengths-based, and supportive story?

	What is an assumption I have made?	What stories and stereotypes are behind that assumption?	What barriers do the stories leave out?	What is a more accurate story I can tell?
E X A M P L E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● My client lacks knowledge and education ● They can not process the information ● The reason they are in this situation is that they made unwise decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● She will not be able to get the work done ● The system works, but not for them ● Poor people are ignorant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Disability ● Emotional Barriers ● Trauma ● Systemic Policy barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This person is being creative and resourceful in a difficult situation ● While these policies are in place it will continue to be hard for her. ● I wonder how I could ask what further resources and support would make this doable
Y O U R T U R N				

Implicit Bias and Microaggressions

Examples of Microaggressions - with focus on race and gender

<https://sph.umn.edu/site/docs/hewg/microaggressions.pdf>

https://academicaffairs.ucsc.edu/events/documents/Microaggressions_Examples_Arial_2014_11_12.pdf

Class based Microaggressions

<https://classism.org/5-class-based-microaggressions/>

<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1043/>

Microaggressions are linked to stress for people of color, women, and those who are gay and lesbian

http://www.canr.msu.edu/news/microaggressions_are_linked_to_stress_for_people_of_color_women_and_those_w

Say Nothing!

<https://www.businessinsider.com/microaggression-unconscious-bias-at-work-2018-6#my-boss-is-crazy-5>

Google's unconscious bias training for its employees

<https://www.businessinsider.com/google-unconscious-bias-training-presentation-2015-12#the-goal-is-to-leave-the-presentation-ready-to-make-a-change-at-google-13>

<https://rework.withgoogle.com/subjects/unbiasing/>

A course on unconscious bias and microaggressions in the workplace

<https://study.com/academy/course/unconscious-bias-microaggressions-in-the-workplace.html>

Race Equity in the Center

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b910ccb6aa60c971d5f98a/t/5adf3de1352f530132863c37/1524579817415/ProInspire-Equity-in-Center-publication.pdf>

[Bias Cleanse http://www.lookdifferent.org/what-can-i-do/bias-cleanse](http://www.lookdifferent.org/what-can-i-do/bias-cleanse)

[Harvard Implicit Bias test - https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)

<https://insighteducationsystems.com/unconscious-bias-implicit-bias/>