

Diversity Briefs ... from the Office of Recruitment & Diversity

Microaggressions: The Little Things that Hurt

As we embark on a new academic year, I want to extend best wishes to you for a productive, engaging and rewarding term. As you work diligently to create an environment where students, faculty, and staff thrive, you certainly understand the benefits of diversity, equity and inclusion. A commitment to these values helps to ensure that all members of our community feel valued, appreciated and respected.

Those of you who handle discrimination complaints know that people often complain about comments or actions from supervisors or peers that make them feel devalued and unappreciated. Some of these behaviors have a name: 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, according to Professor Derald Wing Sue of Columbia University's Teachers College. (Sue *et al.*, 2007)

These subtle forms of discrimination can be deeply ingrained in our society. In fact, often the person who commits a microaggression actually intended the comment to be a compliment and is totally unaware that it was viewed by the recipient as insulting or demeaning. Hidden biases, assumptions or stereotypes can intersect with our multiple identities to impact on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, age, religion, etc.

Internalized hurt and humiliation may result from these encounters, and the effects of microaggressions are cumulative, impacting one's morale and self-worth, potentially leading to anxiety, shame, depression and other health issues. In the workplace, this may result in lack of engagement, absenteeism, lost productivity and turnover. (Sue *et al.*, 2007).

Microaggressions in the Workplace

Awareness of the overall negative effects of microaggressions has become increasingly important, especially in a diverse workforce. In order to foster an atmosphere of inclusion where all feel valued for their contributions, it is important to become familiar with the occurrence of microaggressions so that we can offer corrective measures. Silence may imply tacit approval of inappropriate behaviors.

Here are some examples of microaggressions that may be found in the workplace:



Jennifer S. Rubain

Statement	Unspoken Message
Saying to an Asian presenter who does not speak with an accent, "You speak English so well – were you born in this country?"	You are not American.
Using the phrase "That's so gay."	LGBTQs are considered weird or stupid.
Statement	Unspoken Message
By a faculty member to a student, "Thank you for telling me that you have a learning disability. So are you sure you want to become a high school teacher?"	Those with learning disabilities can't reach their professional goals.
During a search committee meeting, "This candidate is a veteran. What if he/she has PTSD?"	All veterans have mental illness.

By a college lab tech, “Why does Professor Smith need a SmartRoom? She’s been around for 40 years and will never learn how to use this technology.”

An older faculty member is technologically deficient.

Taking Action

Microaggressions go beyond political correctness, a term that has been used to silence discussion and debate. We strive to be decent human beings, who want to do the right thing by our colleagues and those we supervise, but we can all develop improved self-awareness. So how can we become more sensitive to members of our diverse workforce in order to bring out the best in each other? Professor Sue offers the following suggestions:

- Our words do have consequences. So it pays to be vigilant and sensitive to be sure that we are not making statements that may be viewed as microaggressions.
- Our goal is to create a workplace where all are respected and treated with dignity. This includes speaking up when we encounter disrespectful behaviors. Be an ally.
- It may be safe to assume that most colleagues are well-intentioned, and may not realize the hurtful effects of their words.
- Engage the person. Ask a simple and sincere question to determine what he/she means by the statement.
- Try not to be defensive, to place blame or be judgmental.

In closing, it's in everyone's best interest to be mindful of the effect our words have on others. No one wants to feel invisible, powerless, marginalized, or personally diminished. Raising awareness can contribute to positive behavior change and promote mutual understanding of those we encounter in the University community. This may mean that we challenge pre-existing assumptions for the benefit of supporting a diverse and inclusive workplace. But these efforts will result in better morale, greater productivity and an overall improved work environment.

Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., & Esquilin, M. (2007, May-June). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life. *The American Psychologist*, 271-286.

You may also want to take a look at Professor Sue's brief video on microaggressions:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=xAIFGBIEsbQ