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A microaggression can
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Addressing new forms of racism Part I: Defining Microaggressions

By Victoria Peña-Parr © July 17, 2020

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When people think of racism, there's this idea that it is explicit in nature. However, time has shown that this is not the case and racism can be expressed implicitly or not as outwardly as media would like people to perceive.

Many times, when people are discussing implicit racism, the umbrella term microaggressions is used. The term "microaggressions" was coined in 1970 by Black Harvard professor and psychiatrist Chester Pierce. At the time, Pierce was studying the persistent presence of the stigmatizing representations of Black people on television. He defined the term as "subtle, stunning, often automatic and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put-downs' of Black people."

Since then, the study of microaggressions has become increasingly more prominent. Sonia Gipson Rankin, an assistant professor at The University of New Mexico's School of Law, has spent many years studying racial discrimination and the impacts it has on individuals.

She refers to Dr. Derald Wing Sue's interpretation who defines a microaggression as:

– The everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBTQ+ populations or those who have marginalized experiences in their day-to-day interactions.

Microaggressions are not the stereotypical form of bigotry. It is not a noose hanging from a tree branch or calling a Muslim a terrorist. Instead, it is present in day to day conversations, and many people do not realize that they are using microaggressions in their daily vocabulary.

"My forefathers and foremothers in the Black community lived in an era where it was blatant that there was a group of people that didn't like you and were going to actively work to your demise," explains Rankin. "Unfortunately, many people thought that because of the Civil Rights Movement and the election of President (Barack) Obama that we were in a post-racial society, and these beliefs had gone away. They did not teach their children how to cope with the racist attitudes that had gone underground."

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Discrimination in the form of microaggressions can be broken down into three categories: micro-assault, micro-insult, and micro-invalidation. A micro-assault is when a person intentionally behaves in a discriminatory way while not intending to be offensive. An example of this is when someone deliberately does not use a person's preferred pronouns or hanging a confederate flag with the claim that it is for heritage.

A micro-insult is a comment or action that is unintentionally discriminatory. Often times, micro-insults are used to communicate that a certain demographic is not respected and the individual is an exception to the rule. An example of this is telling a Hispanic person that they speak good English or telling a Black person that they were not as aggressive as they expected them to be. Micro-insults can even include making generalizations about certain demographics like assuming that all Asians are good at STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) or second-guessing a women's answer in a STEM classroom. Micro-insults can also occur non-verbally. This



can be seen through a white woman grabbing her purse when a Black man enters the elevator or having a store clerk follow a person of color around the store. *Assistant Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin, UNM School of Law*

A micro-invalidation is when a person's comment invalidates or undermines the experiences or history of a certain group of people. Micro-invalidations are becoming increasingly popular in this day in age. An example of this is saying that a person does not see color or saying that white privilege does not exist.

Rankin notes a common stigma that minority groups run into when dealing with micro-aggressions is that they are being overly sensitive, and engaging in 'snowflake talk.' When this is brought up, Rankin encourages people to change their perspective on the topic.

“My forefathers and foremothers in the Black community lived in an era where it was blatant that there was a group of people that didn't like you and were going to actively work to your demise. Unfortunately, many people thought that because of the Civil Rights Movement and the election of President (Barack) Obama that we were in a post-racial society, and these beliefs had gone away. They did not teach their children how to cope with the racist attitudes that had gone underground.” – Assistant Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin

“The type of discrimination is microaggressions, but it can help people who invalidate microaggressions to understand that it really is that someone is feeling actively disrespected,” states Rankin. “This becomes a conversation about respect in a civil society.”

How Microaggressions Became Normalized in Society

These acts of consistent disrespect have become more accepted in society than their overtly bigoted counterparts. This can be tied back to many factors but Rankin links it most directly to the Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

The human brain is constantly trying to find new ways to process information—also known as cognition—faster. Rankin explains that it is human behavior to make these cognitive short-cuts. Because of this, people often do not realize that what they are saying is harmful to an individual.

“Everyone, everywhere, is working to make these cognitive short cuts. It's just how our brains work,” states Rankin. “These fast-acting behaviors can lead to unintended consequences. It can lead to people feeling disrespected.”

A person's behavior is directly linked to their cognition. All actions an individual does is because of their core beliefs and values which makes it much more difficult to change their behavior.

“When an offender is told to change their behavior, it is already too late because the behavior is just the outpouring of the person's attitude and cognition. It is almost impossible for real change because their cognition doesn't believe it is truly necessary,” explains Rankin. “Your biases will make it hard to understand that you have actively committed a microaggression or discriminatory behavior.”

It is very common that when an individual is accused of committing a microaggression, they experience cognitive dissonance. Cognitive Dissonance occurs when beliefs are contradicted by new information. The theory states that this contradiction causes the brain to feel threatened at a personal and emotional level, and

the person shuts down and disregards any rational evidence that contradicts what they previously regarded as ‘truth’ sometimes even causing physical pain.

Because of this, people experiencing cognitive dissonance try to resolve these inconsistently in one of four ways –changing their thought, changing their behavior, adding a third thought to rationalize their behavior or thought, and or trivializing the inconsistency.

Typically, when a person is accused of committing a microaggression, they become defensive and begin to try to resolve their inconsistencies by either saying that their thought was not discriminatory; rationalizing their behavior by saying they are not discriminatory so their behavior could not be discriminatory; or saying the victim is being too sensitive. Perpetrators will go on to take their reasoning and justify it through the culture that surrounds them.

“These are understood to us by what has been codified by law and what has been portrayed in the media, what has been repeated in our homes and friend circles, as behaviors of what we see people get or don’t get in the workplace,” states Rankin. Rankin goes on to discuss how the laws in the United States are often used to wrongfully justify these behaviors.

“We have come to a falsehood in the United States based on Plessy v. Ferguson. This case is where ‘separate but equal’ was set in law. However, there is a dissent written by Justice Harlan in which he says ‘Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.’ Because of that, we are like ‘oh the Constitution does not see color, then I don’t see color. We fixed it,’ but now we have a color-blind Constitution that is supposed to solve the problems of a color conscience society. And color-blind solutions mask color-coded privileges.” – Assistant Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin

During times of cognitive dissonance, it is the best time to have difficult conversations. Instead of a person justifying their cognition with the media or false-hoods in policy, Rankin encourages having a conversation that empowers a person to examine their cognition, reducing the likelihood of causing a later microaggression.

The Impact

The issue that arises when these core beliefs are not addressed is the detrimental impact those actions or words have on individuals from the impacted demographic. While some may focus on the individual impact of a singular phrase or event, Rankin encourages people to look at the accumulative impact of all the microaggressions a person has experienced in their life.

“Discounting microaggressions gives the impression that people are weak. That on some level there is something wrong with you if you can be broken simply by something someone says or does to you. But, it is not just about what you said about me. It is all the other incidences that have compounded the impact,” states Rankin.

Psychologists often compare this to death by a thousand paper cuts where each statement leaves its mark, and eventually, the burden of all these statements over time cause the person’s harm. These effects can range from psychological damage to as much as physical harm.

“Microaggressions build from this deep place,” continues Rankin. “They start from biases, and microaggressions play themselves out in different ways whether it is undermining someone’s contributions all the way to not giving them a job or promotions. These microaggressions develop into other discriminations.”

Because people exhibiting microaggressions often do not realize their actions are discriminatory, it is very easy for people from marginalized communities to be affected socioeconomically through pay gaps and not receiving job promotions.

Higher education is not immune from these discriminations either. Often, when people experience microaggressions on college campuses, it leads to large attrition rates among not just students, but staff and faculty, as well. Rankin helps set the scene with an example of undermining a student’s ability before they even step foot in the classroom.

“Let’s say I have a stereotype about a specific population,” describes Rankin. “That when that type of student comes to college, they cannot perform. I act on this and dismiss the student in the classroom. This type of microaggression builds up and leads to a very tense campus climate which impacts academic performance. The next thing the professor says is ‘see I knew that they didn’t perform,’ not realizing their role in the cycle.”

Many individuals in minority groups have experienced microaggressions in some form during their lives. While it is easy to argue that members of marginalized groups should grow a thicker skin, the damage of microaggressions is prominent even to those who believe they are numb to them. People who experience microaggressions regularly are likely to be suspect to high-stress levels. Prolonged exposure to these types of stressors can lead to physical detriments including insomnia, chest pains, and even impact pregnancy.

Next -> *Addressing new forms of racism Part 2: Preventing Microaggressions* will run Tuesday, July 21.

Special thank you to Associate Professor Sonia M. Gipson Rankin (<https://lawschool.unm.edu/faculty/gipson-rankin/index.html>) at the UNM School of Law, who teaches in the fields of Torts, Constitutional Law, Family Law, and Race and the Law. Gipson Rankin’s research is centered on the law and its impact on the Black American community, particularly in the areas of technology, family dynamics, and race.

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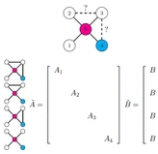
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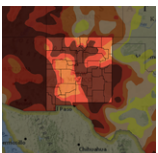
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