Everything You Wanted to Know About Microaggressions but Didn’t Get a Chance to Ask

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Many controversies, myths, and misunderstandings have arisen over the definition of microaggressions and microaggression theory. In order to shed light on the questions and issues surrounding the concept and theory, we provide readers with answers and clarifications that contributing authors discuss in their chapters. It is not our intention to provide an exhaustive list of questions raised in research, theory, and in the manifestation of microaggressions, but rather to provide a thumbnail sketch of basic definitions. We have divided questions into four domains: (a) defining microaggressions, (b) myths about the concept, (c) their harmful impact, and (d) interventions that potentially lower the detrimental consequences.

1. What are microaggressions?

Answer: Simply stated, “microaggressions are derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of an oppressed group.” Microaggressions communicate bias and can be delivered implicitly or explicitly. An example of an implicitly delivered microaggression might be a White woman clutching her purse tightly when an African American man enters an elevator. An explicitly expressed microaggression can occur when a woman overhears a male colleague tell another male colleague that she is a “bitch” after she asserts herself in the workplace.
2. How do microaggressions manifest? What forms do microaggressions take?

Answer: Three types of microaggressions have been identified in the literature and supported by empirical work: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. The term microassault refers to a blatant verbal, non-verbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments. This notion is related to overt racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and religious discrimination in which individuals deliberately convey derogatory messages to target groups. Using epithets like spic or faggot, hiring only men for managerial positions, and requesting not to sit next to a Muslim on an airplane are examples. Unless we are talking about White supremacists, most perpetrators with conscious biases will engage in overt discrimination only under three conditions: (a) when some degree of anonymity can be ensured, (b) when they are in the presence of others who share or tolerate their biased beliefs and actions, or (c) when they lose control of their feelings and actions. Because microassaults are most similar to old-fashioned racism, no guessing game is likely to occur as to their intent: to hurt or injure the recipient. Both the perpetrator and the recipient are clear about what has transpired. For this reason, microassaults are in many respects easier to deal with than those that are unintentional and outside the perpetrator's level of awareness (microinsults and microinvalidations).

Microinsults are unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person's racial heritage/identity, gender identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation identity. Despite being outside the level of conscious awareness, these subtle snubs are characterized by an insulting hidden message. For example, when a person assumes the Black woman standing in an academic office is a secretary (and not a professor) the underlying message is that Black women belong in service roles and are not intellectually capable of holding an advanced degree. African Americans and Latinx individuals consistently report that intellectual inferiority and assumptions about being less qualified and capable are common communications they receive from Whites in their everyday experiences. Microinvalidations are verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group. Like microinsults, they are unintentional and usually outside the perpetrator's awareness. A common microinvalidation is when individuals claim that they do not see religion or color but instead see only the human being. Common statements such as “there is only one race: the human race” negate the lived experiences of religious and ethnic minorities in the United States.
3. Are microaggressions always unintentional and unconscious?

**Answer:** They may be either. Microaggressions vary on a continuum from being intentional to unintentional. They are often reflections of a worldview of inclusion–exclusion, normality–abnormality, or superiority–inferiority. As such, they are often invisible to the perpetrator. Microaggressions may be expressed in the form of implicit bias where the individual is unaware of the biased communication, or via explicit bias where the person is well aware that they are engaging in discriminatory actions. The theory identifies three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are most similar to “old-fashioned” racism where it is most often conscious and deliberately expressed. Calling a Person of Color a racial epithet, or preventing a son or daughter from dating or marrying outside of one’s race are examples of conscious intentionality. Although microinsults and microinvalidations may be intentional, they are most likely unintentionally communicated by the majority of dominant group members. Mistaking a Black person for a service worker, for example, is a microaggression that mistakenly views African Americans as less competent or capable.

4. How are microaggressions different from the everyday incivilities that can occur to everyone regardless of sociocultural identity?

**Answer:** While people of all racial groups may experience everyday incivilities (e.g., when strangers bump into you without apologizing; someone takes the parking space you were waiting for; having a supervisor who is condescending or unfriendly), microaggressions are more stressful because of the possibility that a person’s race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity group contributed to the interaction. When individuals of historically marginalized groups (e.g., People of Color, women, and LGBTQ people) are aware of historical or systemic discrimination or have experienced microaggressions in the past, they may be more conscious of how their identity groups impact interpersonal dynamics. When a person of historically privileged group (e.g., White people, men, heterosexual, and cisgender people) is the enactor of the incivility, even innocuous situations may be viewed as microaggressions.

Conversely, some people (especially individuals of historically privileged groups) may not view incivilities as microaggressions and instead are able to externalize or interpret other potential causes or reasons for the interaction. For instance, when someone bumps into you or takes the parking space you were waiting for, it might be easy to quickly label the person as “a jerk.” Further, because some people may not experience such incivilities often, the impact of such instances may not be as powerful as
Microaggression Theory

how microaggressions that are experienced more frequently or intensely by people of historically marginalized groups.

5. **How are hate crimes and overt conscious expressions of bigotry related to microaggressions?**
   **Answer:** Although they may share some similarities, hate crimes are not the same as microaggressions. Hate crimes are violence-based bias perpetrated against targets with the intent to cause harm (often physical) toward people from marginalized groups. They are criminal acts that are illegal and qualitatively and quantitatively different from microaggressions. Hate crimes are usually conducted by perpetrators identified as bigots, White supremacists, or racists. Violence, intimidation, and direct abuse such as physical assaults, lynchings, and destruction of property are examples. Although microaggressions may cause significant harm as well, and can be consciously delivered, they usually come from well-intentioned people who are most likely unaware of their bias. In fact, most people who commit microaggressions would publicly condemn hate crimes. Addressing hate crimes requires legal action, while an educational approach is more likely in microaggressions.

6. **How are microaggressions against LGBTQ individuals different/same as racial microaggressions?**
   **Answer:** Some racial microaggressions are similar to heterosexist and transphobic microaggressions; for instance, both LGBTQ people and People of Color can experience situations like being excluded in workplace situations, receiving poor customer service, feeling tokenized or exoticized, or hearing biased jokes or slurs. However, there are some microaggressions that may target people based on their identities differently; for example, same-sex couples may encounter glares of disgust when they show public displays of affection, which heterosexual couples may not experience. Meanwhile, Black Americans may be presumed to be a criminal (e.g., they are followed around in a store or by a police officer), whereas a White LGBTQ person may not have this experience. Further, there are certain environments and situations where microaggressions may be encountered differently. Because some LGBTQ people can often “pass” (e.g., other people presume they are heterosexual or cisgender), they may avoid certain microaggressions; meanwhile, many People of Color may always be conscious of racial microaggressions because their race is something that cannot be hidden. On the contrary, some People of Color may cope better with microaggressions because their parents or families may have socialized them to be aware of race and racism; conversely, LGBTQ people are often the only LGBTQ people in their families and may even experience microaggressions in their own homes. Thus, while microaggressions may
manifest differently, they still have harmful impacts on people who experience them.

7. **How do intersecting identities influence the experience of microaggressions?**

   **Answer:** Intersectionality refers to an individual facing multiple forms of discrimination and oppression based on overlapping marginalized identities. Much of the work on intersecting identities has been pioneered by African American female scholars in the fields of political science, sociology, law, and more recently psychology. While much of the work on microaggressions to date has explored the manifestation of this phenomenon in relation to singular identity categories (i.e., racial microaggressions and gender microaggressions), emerging work supports the idea that there are distinct categories and themes of microaggressions related specifically to intersectionality. For example, gendered racial microaggressions refer to experiences that communicate discriminatory messages about being female and African American or Asian American (or another racial/ethnic group). These experiences are unique to the intersection of this particular gender and racial group membership and as such cannot be classified as a gender microaggression or a racial microaggression alone. Please see Chapter 4 for a thorough review of this literature.

8. **Aren’t some microaggressions really macroaggressions? If not, is there such a thing as a macroaggression?**

   **Answer:** Microaggressions and macroaggressions are not the same concepts. There is much confusion concerning the use of the term *macroaggression*. Some incorrectly use the term to describe the overt and intentionally harmful form of microaggressions, otherwise known as microassualts (#2 above). Chester Pierce is credited with creating the term *microaggression* and intended for the term *micro* to convey the everyday, commonplace nature of these interactions. In contrast, the term *macroaggression*, defined by education scholars Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel Solórzano, represents the systemic and institutionalized forms of bias and oppression that impact the lives of entire groups of people. This is most evident in laws and public policies that create systems of oppression and disparities in education, employment, healthcare, and the criminal justice system, to name a few.

9. **Can mascots, media, and offensive symbols like the confederate flag and Klan hood be expressions of microaggressions?**

   **Answer:** Yes, microaggressions can be delivered through mascots, media, and offensive symbols. For example, the confederate flag has become a symbol of racism in contemporary culture, thus displaying
Microaggression Theory

this flag on one’s car, house, or building communicates that the person or organization endorses the tenets of racism. Additionally, mascots for sportsteams (e.g., “Redskins”) negatively objectify a group of people (First Nations People). Contemporary removal of statues of individuals that supported racist efforts reflects the acknowledgment of the harmful impact that these statues represent.

10. Is there such thing as online microaggressions?

Answer: The Internet provides a giant stage upon which one can espouse their political and personal views—all with a guaranteed cloak of anonymity, if they so choose. Therefore, online social media forums, chat groups, blogs, and so forth, are places where blatant forms of discrimination are rampant and evident. A wealth of misinformation on the Internet also contributes to stereotypes and biased views of various social identity groups. Researchers have coined terms such as online racial discrimination, cyber racism, and online hate crimes to describe the more overt forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and the like that take place on the Internet. However, recent investigations support the notion that online material such as visual imagery, memes, and video game content can transmit derogatory, insulting, and invalidating messages about marginalized groups in subtle and covert ways. In addition to these nonverbal manifestations of microaggressions, chat groups and comment walls provide forums for individuals to express invalidating views and statements without an intention of discrimination or hate. For example, a social media post about the recent fatal shooting of an unarmed Black youth by a police officer provokes opinions and sentiments across the nation, all shared on various online platforms. Well-intentioned individuals can respond to these incidents with color-blind statements such as “We are all human beings sharing the same race, and I only wish this hadn’t happened” which represent a microinvalidation of the lived racial experience of Black men in America. How one experiences, interprets, and is impacted by statements such as these or by nonverbal material online (as opposed to experiencing them in vivo) represents a new area of study. For more discussion of the manifestation of online microaggressions, please see Chapter 12.

Myths About Microaggressions

11. Aren’t we priming children to be biased when we teach them about microaggressions?

Answer: Microaggressions and contemporary forms of bias are theorized to be insidious and commonly occurring in part because people in
American society are socialized from an early age to not discuss issues of difference and to espouse egalitarian ideologies. This creates a false social dynamic where people are quick to dismiss prejudicial beliefs as the main precipitant behind a microaggressive encounter. Further, when people are unaware of the microaggression framework and issues of privilege and oppression, they lack the language to describe and make sense of the microaggressions they encounter across the lifespan. Research indicates that the microaggression framework helps people, including children, make sense of microaggressive encounters and the related impacts. Chapter 17 (Kohli, Arteaga, & McGovern) articulates the dynamic of microaggressions for children and teenagers in K-12 education. These scholars provide strategies for addressing microaggressions in K-12 education and suggest that the first step is having the ability to identify the microaggressive experience, which requires knowledge of the microaggression framework. Additionally, having knowledge of the microaggression framework can help young people avoid internalizing microaggressive messages, which can moderate the negative impact microaggressions have on a number of well-being and life-success outcomes.

12. Aren't microaggressions harmless, trivial, and simply small slights? Why make such a big thing out of them?
Answer: Far from being benign and insignificant, microaggression research indicates they take a heavy psychological and physical toll on targets. They have been found to be different than the everyday incivilities that anyone can experience regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation/identity. Experiencing an insult from a rude clerk that is nonrace based, for example, may bring about feelings of anger or agitation, but when the incident ends it is over. Racial microaggressions, however, have an impact that is both quantitatively and qualitatively different. For targets, microaggressions are continual, never-ending, and cumulative in nature. Marginalized group members experience them from the time they awake until they go to sleep. They experience them from the moment of birth until they die. As a result, People of Color are under constant race-related stress that requires constant vigilance and psychological arousal. It would be a monumental mistake to dismiss microaggressions as only “small slights” that have minimal harmful impact.

13. With all the talk about microaggressions, I’m afraid to say anything at all about race or differences? Doesn’t microaggression theory stifle free speech?
Answer: Should people shy away from these conversations, for fear of offending someone? The reality is that any discussion of worldviews is
likely to offend someone, and we do not all need to agree. We just need to be respectful of each other’s lived experience and be flexible in our thinking. When someone is offended by a statement, belief, or action based on their identity, the most productive way to address this is through engaging discourse between the two groups. Microaggression opponents argue that Republican, Christian, and conservative ideas in particular have been shut down and stifled. They argue that social justice warriors (SJWs) are attacking these perspectives and punishing those who hold these views. In reality, these viewpoints tend to cause multiple groups to feel marginalized. For example, opposing abortion and gay marriage will alienate some women and men. If you hold these views, prepare to hear their effects on others. They cause others to feel angry, terrified, sad, and so forth. A healthy dialogue allows both perspectives to co-exist, no matter how difficult, tense, and heavy that conversation may be. The reality is that it is easier to stay silent or assign blame than it is to sit with the complexity of emotions that arise when microaggressions are named and processed by all parties.

14. Dominant group members aren’t the only ones with biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. People of Color, for example, do as well. Why are we always accusing Whites as the only group that commits microaggressions? Can’t People of Color commit microaggressions against one another?

**Answer:** It is true that people of all groups may have biases, stereotypes, and prejudices toward other people; in fact, studies on implicit biases support that people of all groups may have particular preferences toward different groups based on race, gender, skin color, size, and so forth. Because of these biases, people of any group may mistreat others based on their identities. However, we tend to concentrate on microaggressions committed by people of historically privileged groups (e.g., White people, men, and heterosexual people) because such interactions are reflective of power and systemic oppression. From a young age, children are socialized to believe that the experiences of historically privileged groups are normalized (i.e., American standards of beauty, cultural values, styles of communication are all based on White, male, heteronormative, and upper-class perspectives). Thus, when people of historically marginalized groups experience microaggressions, the incident may have a more negative impact because they are reminders of their lack of power and privilege. For example, when a White man makes demeaning comments about a Woman of Color, the interaction is a manifestation of the systemic racism and sexism that prevent Women of Color from succeeding. In fact, a Woman of Color who hears such a comment may feel
retraumatized from the multiple amounts of times that she has been demeaned in the past due to her race and gender. Conversely, if a Woman of Color makes a demeaning comment about a White man and hurts his feelings, he is still part of a group that has the most systemic power in this country (e.g., White men make the most money, hold most government positions). He is likely to have experienced such instances in his life, so the comment may be viewed as an isolated event and may not have a lasting effect on his mental health.

Because of systemic oppression and stereotyped messages that people learn about different groups, People of Color can also commit microaggressions against each other. For instance, when an Asian American commits a criminality microaggression toward a Black American (e.g., follows a Black person in a store, holds her purse closer to her when a Black man enters an elevator), the microaggression may be retraumatizing due to the anti-Black racism that many Black people experience by Asian Americans. In some ways, the interaction may be even more hurtful because they presume that the Asian American should be more aware of racism (whereas they may expect such microaggressions from White Americans). Similarly, if an Asian American man encounters an emasculating microaggression from a Black or Latino man (e.g., someone says that Asian men are feminine or have small penises), he may feel retraumatized from past similar microaggressions. He may also feel more hurt because he presumes that another Man of Color would be more sensitive or aware of the harmful impact of stereotypes.

Impact of Microaggressions

15. Can microaggressions affect problem solving and learning?

Answer: Yes, microaggressions can negatively impact one's ability to concentrate, to solve problems, and to learn new material. Studies suggest that hostile racial climates perpetuated through microaggressions on college campuses disrupt students' ability to concentrate and to participate in class discussions. Such disruption inhibits students' ability to learn new material. Moreover, experiencing microaggressions in the classroom has been linked to feelings of invisibility, isolation, and self-doubt, all of which impair one's ability to focus on tasks and solve problems in the classroom.

16. How do microaggressions affect work productivity?

Answer: Workplace microaggressions affect work productivity in several ways. Types of microaggressions experienced in workplace settings include lack of representation of one's own group, invisibility,
invalidation of one’s individual experience, and exclusion from social events. Collectively, these types of microaggressions can lead to high rates of depression, isolation, and absenteeism in the workplace. Perceptions (often misperceptions) of worker attitudes and behavior by supervisors can lead to reprimanding and negative performance plan evaluations. These outcomes can detrimentally impact salary increases and promotion. Moreover, microaggressions can lead to turnover and dismissal.

17. Can microaggressions impact mental and physical well-being?

**Answer:** Yes, a decade of research has found that microaggressions have negative impacts on mental and physical health. In fact, numerous assessments and measures have been created to examine the microaggressions experienced by People of Color, women, and LGBTQ people. Results from those studies find that a higher cumulative amount of microaggressions negatively impacts symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and trauma; behavioral health issues like alcohol use and eating disorders; and psychological constructs such as self-esteem, worldview, and academic achievement. Recent, correlational studies have also found that microaggressions have negative health consequences—including pain, fatigue, physical functioning, and perceptions of general health.

18. How do microaggressions impact people with privileged identities, such as in White people?

**Answer:** Everyone in society is negatively impacted by the prejudicial ideologies that give life to systems of privilege and oppression, and that impact individual institutional functioning. Although the impact of microaggressions is qualitatively and quantitatively different for those in oppressed and privileged social locations, the costs to those with privileged identities are most often overlooked. However, it is necessary to consider and understand how those with more privileged identities are both positively and negatively impacted by microaggressions. In Chapter 9, Clark and Spanierman delineate the psychosocial costs of microaggressions to White people. These scholars suggest that people who benefit from a system of privilege and oppression have a skewed perception of social reality and are often unaware of the role they play in maintaining their privilege at the social and economic expense of the oppressed. The associated impacts include a wide range of cognitive, affective, behavioral, moral, and spiritual costs. For example, the false sense of social reality can lead to a denial of individual bias and an overreliance on an egalitarian worldview whereby the privileged extend cognitive effort to appear nonbiased. The emotional and behavioral costs can include fear fueled by stereotype that leads to avoiding interpersonal interaction.
with those from different racial and social identity groups. These costs can run very deep and influence moral development where the privileged develop a loss of humanity and respect for basic human rights in order to maintain the benefits associated with their privilege.

**Intervention and Prevention**

19. **What can educational institutions do to address microaggressions on campus?**

   **Answer:** When universities and other educational institutions commit to understanding and addressing microaggressions at the systemic level, they are likely to engender real and enduring change on their campuses. Just as scholars have discussed the inherent flaws in a one-course approach to understanding diversity and multiculturalism in a curriculum, singular approaches toward addressing microaggressions (such as a single workshop on the topic for faculty, or a one day discussion in a classroom based on a checklist of experiences) will be superficial and potentially lead to a greater misunderstanding and division between groups. Therefore, providing multiple educative offerings across a variety of campus opportunities is paramount in an authentic effort to eradicate microaggressions.

   Microaggressions can be described and understood academically and intellectually through discussions of subtle forms of discrimination and related theories, but there will also always be an emotional processing aspect to this work that does not always feel natural in classrooms and other spaces within academic institutions. Providing a range of educative offerings that allow for the exploration of microaggression experience on campus from both an intellectual and emotional point of view will strengthen community and build pathways to change. Therefore, workshop series, summits, continuous learning, and professional development opportunities that seek to expand awareness on how different groups of people experience the campus environment and university at-large will benefit the overall institutional climate. Moreover, offering these programs to all members of the campus community (from staff to students to professors and deans) is crucial. For a detailed exploration of systemic practices that reduce microaggressions on campus, please see Chapter 18.

20. **What can I do to address and prevent microaggressions?**

   **Answer:** People can help to address and prevent microaggressions interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically. While this book will provide a comprehensive review of how to do so, previous scholars have identified both small and large ways to do so. As a smaller example, parents may
Microaggression Theory

engage in the process of racial socialization—or teaching their children about the realities of racism and systemic oppression in age-appropriate ways. When young people are socialized from a younger age to understand systems and injustices, they are more likely to be comfortable in talking about differences and are more likely to cope with discrimination. For People of Color, racial socialization influences one’s ability to succeed academically. Thus, talking about issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, religion, and other identities may assist children in being more comfortable in recognizing systemic oppression, which may help them to address such issues when they are adults.

An example of a larger-scale way to address microaggressions is to advocate for systemic policies that educate constituents on microaggressions—which can potentially change cultures that are often biased, discriminatory, or noninclusive. For instance, leaders in educational institutions can introduce students to curriculum on microaggressions, group dynamics, and intercultural communication. Teachers can reevaluate how curriculum may be culturally biased and may advocate for changes accordingly. Students may also vocalize their disdain with any injustices they notice in their school policies or cultures. While you will find several other recommendations for how to address microaggressions throughout the book, we acknowledge that there are so many different cultural and historical dynamics that may prevent someone from being able to address microaggressions in any group or environment. However, we hope that readers will be able to find ways to consider and integrate these recommendations however possible.

21. Can an organization or a workplace do anything to prevent and address microaggressions?

Answer: Yes, they can. One of the best ways to prevent and address microaggressions in the workplace is through diversity training initiatives. It is recommended that these initiatives include training methods to enhance awareness of biases. For example, one way this can be accomplished is by implementing trainings that include the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a computer-based test that measures reaction times to pairings (e.g., images of White and Black individuals with the words good and bad). Reaction time to these pairings indicates the preferences or biases of the individual taking the test. Other interventions include dedicating resources to increasing workplace awareness of microaggressions and having regular discussions of the impact of microaggressions on management decisions and employee performance. Moreover, workplaces can mitigate the adverse effects of microaggressions through leadership and manager accountability, mentorship, and employee resource groups and recruitment of racially and culturally diverse staff members.
22. **How can people cope or deal with microaggressions? What can White allies or bystanders do to stem the expression of microaggressions?**

**Answer:** There are a number of coping strategies people can use to mitigate the negative consequences of exposure to microaggressions. First, knowledge of the microaggressions framework can be a source of liberation for people who experience microaggressions in their daily lives. For example, having a language to internally process microaggressive encounters can reduce the cognitive energy associated with making sense of the covert nature of microaggressions. Similarly, being knowledgeable of the microaggressions framework can allow people to more effectively engage with social support, a time-tested stress buffer. Over the past 10 years, society has witnessed a dramatic rise in attention to microaggressions. This includes people, especially young people, engaging in social activism around microaggression issues and advocating for institutional change. Actively working to increase awareness about microaggressions and work toward solutions to reduce their occurrence can serve as a coping strategy. Active engagement in anti-microaggression movements can be a source of empowerment and help people from internalizing the negative messages embedded in microaggressive encounters that lead to compromises in well-being. Similarly, White and privileged allies can work toward stemming the expression of microaggressions by understanding their bias and the ways that it manifests via microaggressions. They can advantageously use their privilege by educating about microaggressions to their peers and others who share their privileged identities. Privileged allies can also disrupt the microaggressive encounters they witness by validating the experience of the microaggressed.