

Navigating Microaggressions in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

Logging into the Zoom portal, Jeniqua felt her nerves give way to a flurry of butterflies. This was her first one-on-one feedback session with her professor, and she wanted to make a good impression. After weeks of peer group meetings, she and her team felt confident that their presentation was A-worthy, and she was eager to receive feedback. Having followed his directions for 'professional dress', she had worn her dark-colored pants suit, small pearl earrings, and a pair of black heels during the video's taping. Now able to see her instructor on screen, she held her breath as he pressed play on his shared monitor and began to review the recording. Watching along in silence, she smiled to herself as she recalled how great her hair looked that day and made a mental note to purchase more styling products on her way home. The jarring sound of his voice pulled her from her thoughts: "If you choose to wear your ethnic hair, it should be pulled back when giving a presentation; you would look more professional."

Keywords

neuroscience, technology, counseling

Brief and commonplace, microaggressions are verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate stereotyped, derogatory, or hostile beliefs toward people of color and those with marginalized identities (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are perpetrated at both the conscious and subconscious levels. They often reflect the implicit bias or unconscious thoughts or feelings that a person holds about an individual or group based upon their racial, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background. The term micro, often misunderstood as minimizing the impact of these derogatory slights, refers to the interpersonal occurrence of these assaults rather than at the macrolevel as associated with systemic oppression (Spanierman et al., 2021).

Impact

Sue (2010) identified four pathways that he asserts demonstrate the impact of microaggressions: Biological, Emotional, Cognitive, and Behavioral. According to the researcher, chronic stress induces a biological pathway that decreases one's ability to fight off infection, depresses the immune system, and directly links to physical health conditions like hypertension and diabe-

tes. Avent-Harris et al. (2019) found that microaggressions in academic spaces contribute to stressful work environments when encountered by women, specifically African American women holding faculty positions. Examining the relationship between racial microaggressions and mental health among undergraduate students, Nadal et al. (2014a) found that the frequency of microaggressions predicted participants' poorer mental health. The researchers found a significant correlation between racial microaggressions and symptoms of depression and negative affect. Emotional pathways such as depression and anxiety are common reactions to microaggressions. In academic or employment settings, these experiences were found to harm self-esteem among students (Nadal et al., 2014b). Cognitive pathways are experienced as recipients attempt to make sense of the incident. According to Sue (2010), the more ambiguous the assault, the more difficult this process becomes and frequently disrupts cognitive processing as the recipient challenges their perception and recall of the incident. Furthering this disruption are questions of if and how to respond and the potential for consequences in hi-

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erarchical settings such as online academic spaces. Behavioral pathways are often the results of adaptive or maladaptive coping (Sue, 2010). In a literature review conducted by Spanierman et al. (2021), coping with microaggressions often required disarming strategies such as collective coping or seeking our support from the community, resistance coping or confronting perpetrators directly, or self-protective coping through engagement in self-care practices. Sue identified other behavioral strategies, including hyper-vigilance, anger, hopelessness, or forced compliance.

Prevalence

Microaggressions are commonly experienced in academic environments in classrooms, meetings, or other academic spaces through student-student, faculty-faculty, and student-faculty interactions (Avent-Harris et al., 2019; Henfield, Owens, & Witherspoon, 2011; Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013; Orozco et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2009; Thacker & Minton, 2021; Vaishnav, 2021). Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that instructors were often the perpetrators of these microaggressions, with students being the most common target. In another recent study exploring the experiences of seven women counselor educators, the researchers note the emotional distress around responding to microaggressions, whether as victims or perpetrators of microaggressions (Avent Harris et al., 2019). The authors also noted the lack of tools around responding to microaggressions, creating more emotional and psychological distress for participants as they struggled to navigate how to respond in different situations. Sue and colleagues (2010) noted that no response was the most common response in such situations because of not knowing what to do. Recently, Sue and colleagues (2019) published their work on strategies to disarm microaggressions, providing one of the first elaborate tools for navigating microaggressions in vivo. We will explore these strategies related to counselor education and online learning in the following section.

Strategies to Navigate Microaggressions

Sue and colleagues (2019) suggest four strategies to navigate microaggressions in vivo. We briefly elaborate on these and ways to navigate each in an online learning environment.

Make the Invisible Visible

Microaggressions often thrive in invisibility as we seek to avoid the discomfort associated with confronting them. However, Sue and colleagues suggest that it is essential to address them as they occur by pausing class and calling attention to the comment or behavior they noticed, regardless of its source. Examples of

making the invisible visible include statements such as, “You assume I am not experienced because I look young,” or “Did you notice your body language when Simon walked into the space?”

Disarm the Microaggression

The next step is to disarm the microaggression by expressing verbal disagreement, interrupting and re-directing, or asking open-ended questions. Examples include, “If I heard you correctly, you said men are better leaders than women, am I correct?” This directly challenges the assumption behind the microaggression and addresses the stereotype or bias driving the comment or behavior.

Educate the Perpetrator

Educating the perpetrator is an essential step in navigating microaggressions in vivo. Help perpetrators understand that while they may have had good intentions, the impact of their behavior was harmful. Directly addressing the assumption or bias could also help educate students or colleagues. Examples include, “While you meant this as a compliment, it is offensive and a stereotype.” This helps provide awareness to the harmful impact of the microaggression, regardless of the intentions of the perpetrator.

Seek External Support

Finally, an essential step in navigating microaggressions is to seek external support or reinforcement. Possible actions could be reaching out to colleagues or professors and escalating the incident to higher-ups to help bring more visibility. Whether the victim of microaggressions or the perpetrator, the experience can be emotionally exhausting and stressful. It is important to seek consultation and support as we navigate our own biases and assumptions while also working on our self-awareness as educators and students in the field.

Intentionality and Inclusivity

Given the ubiquitous nature of microaggressions, educators can set the expectations by acknowledging that microaggressions can and most likely will occur in a classroom environment. We recommend the following steps to foster inclusive spaces that support helpful confrontation of microaggressions.

Model Inclusive Behavior

To prepare classrooms and academic environments for inclusivity, it is vital to model inclusive behavior from day one. Examples of such intentional actions might include offering introductions using preferred pronouns and acknowledging different identities and diversity in

perspectives in the classroom. It is especially important to acknowledge and own up to any microaggressions perpetuated by you as an instructor and practice cultural humility in engaging in dialogues around microaggressions.

Discuss and Include a Microaggression Clause

Do not hesitate to discuss the topic of microaggressions within the context of the learning environment. Encourage students to share their thoughts on the topic by inviting a dialogue within the classroom. Consider including an inclusivity and microaggressions clause in the syllabus. For example, include a clause that outlines expectations: "1) everyone learns in a safe and supportive environment; 2) all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, irrespective of citizenship, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender/sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, or dis/ability; 3) everyone plays a role in creating positive classroom spaces." (Adapted from Sulik & Keys, 2014, p. 157). Further, including that if verbal/non-verbal indignities are consciously or unconsciously expressed in class (e.g., microaggressions), we will use them as learning opportunities by bringing awareness through dialogue. This can help foster growth in awareness, deepen understanding of course content, and enhance our ability to create an inclusive learning environment (Nazzal, 2020).

Use Broaching to Confront Uncomfortable Topics

Broaching is active engagement in exploring how sociopolitical factors and an individual's identity may impact how individuals show up in meetings, classrooms, or supervision (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Educators can use broaching to model and promote inclusivity and safety for conversations around microaggressions.

Note Your Own Defensiveness

When confronted with a microaggression, our first reaction is often to defend our behavior by explaining. Instead, remember the importance of impact over intent. As helping professionals, we all have good intentions, but that does not always lead to a good impact. Therefore, it is important not to equate microaggressions with being a bad person. Instead, resist the urge to explain, acknowledge the mistake, apologize, and move on.

Conclusion

Microaggressions are common occurrences that can have lingering emotional, physical, behavioral, and cognitive impacts on those involved. Knowing how to navigate these assaults requires intentionality and the creation of safe and inclusive environments that support uncomfortable but necessary conversations. In

this showcase paper, we have offered four strategies for addressing microaggressions as they occur in on-line academic settings as well as strategies to create inclusive spaces within our online learning environments that can help educators and students engage with microaggressions in vivo and minimize the overall harmful impact that it can have on those engaged in these interactions.

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