11-2018

Minimizing and Addressing Microaggressions in the Workplace: Be Proactive, Part Two

Shamika Dalton

Shamika Dalton and Michele Villagran

Minimizing and addressing microaggressions in the workplace

Be proactive, part 2

Our nation's history plays a huge role in the way we perceive underrepresented groups. From slavery to segregation, to the inequality in compensation for women and people of color, to the refusal to wed same sex couples, discrimination and opposition has plagued the United States for decades. Since the Civil Rights Movement, discrimination towards underrepresented groups has shifted from overt acts to subtle and semiconscious manifestations called *microaggressions*. These manifestations reside in well-intentioned individuals who are often unaware of their biased beliefs, attitudes, and actions. They can lead to inequities within our relationships and affect our work productivity.

Part two of this two-part article series defines the various types of microaggressions, discuss the effects of microaggressions in the workplace, and offer best practices for addressing and coping with microaggressions.

Microaggressions

Chester M. Pierce, a Harvard psychiatrist, coined the term *microaggression* in 1970. Originally, the term was grounded in race and applied to the insults and dismissals geared towards Blacks from White Americans.[1] In 1973, Mary Rowe, an MIT economist, extended the meaning of microaggression to include aggressions against women.[2] Today, microaggressions are defined as the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group memberships.[3] The definition includes discriminatory comments made towards the LGBTQ community, elderly, people with disabilities, immigrants, and people who belong to certain religious affiliations.

Due to their subtle nature, it can be hard to identify when a microaggressions occurs. To create a taxonomy, Derald Wing Sue identified three types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. A *microassault* is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions.[4] Microassaults are symbolic of old-fashioned racism, and examples include using racial slurs or displaying a swastika.

A *microinsult* is described as communications that convey rudeness, insensitivity, and demean a person's racial heritage or identity.[5] An example of microinsult is to ask a colleague of color how she got her job, implying that she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.

Shamika Dalton is interim associate director and professor of legal research at University of Florida Levin College Law, email: sdalton@law.ufl.edu, and Michele Villagran is assistant professor, School of Information, at San Jose State University, email: michele.villagran@sjsu.edu

Microinvalidations are regarded as communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.[6] Examples include comments such as "There is one race, the human race" or "I don't see color." The notion of colorblindness is a major form of microinvalidation as it negates the experience and reality for people of color.

Microaggressions are not limited to human interactions but may also be environmental in nature.[7] The lack of people of color and women in leadership positions, hallways with portraits of White male deans, colleges or universities with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper class males, or library displays that are not representative of the diverse patrons that we serve are all examples of environmental microaggressions. In these environments, one's identity is minimized or made insignificant through exclusion, and one may question whether they "belong."

Effects of microaggressions in the workplace

Workplace culture in higher education is not exempt from microaggressions. While microassaults are less frequent, microinsults and microinvalidations are common because of their negative and unconscious nature. Comments such as, "You are very articulate" (race), "Aren't you a bit overqualified?" (age), "You should smile more!" (gender), "You're being paranoid" (mental health), "Wow, I'm so surprised. You don't look or sound gay!" (sexual orientation), and "Ugh, I can't read. I'm totally dyslexic today" (disability), are all examples of microaggressions in the workplace.

Intersectionality can influence the intensity or frequency of one's experience with microaggressions. *Intersectionality* is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.[8] For instance, a Black transgender woman who is denied service at a restaurant because of her gender identity, her race, or both.

Microaggressions are subtle, but they are not absolved of their effect. Research shows that the cumulative effect of microaggressions can 1) contribute to a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate; 2) devalue social group identities; 3) lower work productivity; 4) create physical health problems (i.e., depression, anxiety, insomnia); and 5) mental health issues due to stress, low self-esteem, and emotional turmoil.[9] To combat this, it is important to offer trainings and best practices to minimize and cope with microaggressions in the workplace.

Responding to microaggressions as a manager

We spend a lot of time at our workplaces and employees want a safe and secure environment to work. The quality of the work environment is critical to workplace productivity. As a manager, we need to first accept that microaggressions are happening all around us in the workplace. Resisting the notion that this type of behavior occurs can ultimately hurt the institution. Once we recognize this, then we can take steps to prevent and help reduce the impact of microaggressions.

Improving our work relationships can help foster an environment that encourages honest discussion within the workplace. This allows individuals to feel more comfortable coming to you when microaggressions occur. Whether you committed or witnessed a microaggression, acknowledge the occurrence and call out any inappropriate behavior. Do not "sweep the situation under the rug" or pretend it never happened. This will only make the situation worse. Institutions can use an employee sentiment assessment in order to regularly assess how employees are feeling and see where areas of concern may be occurring. Advocate for annual cultural competence training. Knowledge is power. Awareness training can minimize the occurrence of microaggressions.

Responding to microaggressions as an employee

If a microaggression occurs, ask yourself a series of questions: Did this microaggression really occur? Was it deliberate or unintentional? Should I respond to this microaggression, and, if so, how should I respond?

In order to diminish the harm when individuals are confronted with their microaggressive acts, the perpetrator usually believes that the victim has overreacted and is being overly sensitive and/or petty.[10] However, we know that research has proven otherwise, and avoidance is not the answer. If you become a recipient of a microaggression, there are several steps in which to respond:

- Pause and take a deep breath. Do not act with anger as it will not help the situation.
- Decide when and if you want to respond. Perhaps you would not engage in a conversation about the comment if it came from a public patron, who is not a regular user of the library. If it is coming from a colleague, perhaps you would want to address it.
- Assume there is no malicious intent. Approach the situation with a positive attitude, and give the individual the benefit of the doubt.
- Focus on the event and not the person. The goal is not to win a point or to make your colleague feel bad. It is about helping them understand how their comments or actions are hurtful.
- Discuss your feelings about the impact of the incident. Use emotional intelligence to help diffuse the situation. Try to understand the situation, and be empathetic.
- Actively listen.
- Document the incident(s). If this behavior becomes a pattern, you may have to take formal action. Human resources may request specifics (date, time) of each incident.
- If you choose not to address the interaction directly, you should process your experience with an ally, who will help validate your experience. Or do something creative to express your feelings about the experience (i.e., write your feelings in a journal).

Colleagues, who have witnessed microaggressions, can also take a proactive role in ensuring that the workplace is healthy. Speak up when you see inappropriate behavior directed at a colleague. Avoid being sarcastic, mocking, or arrogant with your colleagues. Employ the Platinum Rule—treat others the way they want to be treated.[11]

Coping with microaggressions

At the 2018 Symposium for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, someone asked, "When I am subjected to a microaggression, how do I get over it?" This is a great question, and here are a few ways individuals cope with microaggressions, internally and externally.

- **Self-protective.** Self-protective coping strategies are used to minimize the stressful effect of microaggressions. Shifting is an adaptive coping mechanism by which one will strategically emphasize commonalities with colleagues while de-emphasizing their differences. Another way to do this is by not sharing much about one's life to avoid the common intersectionality between work and personal life.[12]
- **Support networks.** It is important to have a circle of trusted advisors who can act as a source for advice. Mentorship also offers an opportunity to feel empowered and to validate your place in the organization.[13] Acting as a sounding board, your mentor can help you decide if more formal action needs to be taken.
- **Self-care.** Self-care includes seeking therapy, engaging in physical exercises, taking vacations, and spending time with family. Prayer and meditation are also self-care activities that provide a sense of empowerment and protection, while helping you offer forgiveness for the perpetrators.[14]
- **Forgiveness.** As the victim, you have to be able to move past the microaggression made towards you. Harboring anger and animosity towards a colleague will inevitably affect your working relationship and maybe even your productivity. No one wants to offend or humiliate a colleague, but we have all done or said something that unintentionally offended someone. As the offender, you have to be able to own up to it, apologize, and forgive yourself.

Conclusion

A responsibility to our profession, our community, and ourselves is to foster a healthy, inclusive

(continues on page 564)

cedpsych.2015.03; Christelle Devos, Gentiane Boudrenghien, Nicolas Van der Linden, Assaad Azzi, Mariane Frenay, Benoit Galand and Olivier Klein, "Doctoral Students' Experiences Leading to Completion or Attrition: A Matter of Sense, Progress and Distress," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 32, no. 1 (2017): 61-77, doi:10.1007/s10212-016-0290-0; Lise M. Dyckman, "Fear of Failure and Fear of Finishing: A Case Study on the Emotional Aspects of Dissertation Proposal Research, with Thoughts on Library Instruction and Graduate Student Retention," in "Currents and Convergence: Navigating the Rivers of Change, Proceedings of the ACRL 12th National Conference" (2005): 351-362. www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/events/pdf/dyckman05.pdf.

5. Valérie Spezi, "Is Information-Seeking Behavior of Doctoral Students Changing?: A Review of the Literature (2010-2015)," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 22, no. 1 (2016): 78-106; Johanna Tuñón and Laura Ramirez, "ABD or EdD? A Model of Library Training for Distance Doctoral Students," *Journal of Library Administration* 50, (2010): 989-996, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2010.489004; Peter Macauley and Green Rosemary, "Can Our Relationships Be Reconceptualized? Librarians, Information Literacy, and Doctoral Learners," J*ournal of Education for Library and Information Science* 50, no. 2 (2009): 68-78; Colleen Harris, "The Case for Partnering Doctoral Students with Librarians: A Synthesis of the Literatures," *Library Review* 60, no. 7 (2011): 599-620, https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531111153614.

("Minimizing and addressing . . ." continues from page 540)

work environment for all individuals to thrive. Individuals from diverse backgrounds are often subjected to subtle or overt microaggressions within the workplace. As our series concludes, we hope that you will do your part to help identify microaggressions, recognize the impact they have on others and yourself, and begin to implement some of the coping strategies and suggestions within your own institutions. Regardless of your position, we all have a role to play in helping shift our culture.

Notes

1. Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271–86, 272–73.

2. "The Quiet Discrimination of Microinequities: A Q&A with Adjunct Professor Mary Rowe," *Newsroom,* February 3, 2016, accessed July 8, 2018, http://mitsloan.mit.edu/newroom/articles/the-quiet-discrimination-of-microinequities-a-qa-with-adjunct-professor-mary-rowe/.

3. Ibid., Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 273.

4. Ibid., 274.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 273.

8. Oxford Dictionary, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intersectionality.

9. Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 14–15.

10. Ibid., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 279.

11. Some of these recommendations come from an Indiana State Library webinar I attended February 15, 2018, titled, "Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace." The webinar was led by Endia Sowers-Paige, pre-law advisor at the University of Georgia, http://indianastatelibrary.evanced.info/signup/EventDetails?eventid=2985.

12. Aisha Holder, Margo A. Jackson, and Joseph G. Ponterotto, "Racial Microaggression Experiences and Coping Strategies of Black Women in Corporate Leadership," *Qualitative Psychology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 164–80, 173.

13. Ibid., 173–74.

14. Ibid., 174.