

“Microaggression: More Than Just Race”

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Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group [identity](#) or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.

What Do Microaggressions Look Like?

While microaggressions are generally discussed from the perspective of [race](#) and racism, any marginalized group in our society may become targets: people of color, women, LGBT persons, those with disabilities, [religious](#) minorities, and so on. Some sample microaggressions and their hidden meanings are given below.

Racial Microaggressions:

- A White man or woman clutches their purse or checks their wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.)
- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking "good English." (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A Black couple is seated at a table in the restaurant next to the kitchen despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front. (Hidden message: You are a second-class citizen and undeserving of first-class treatment.)

[Gender](#) Microaggressions:

- An [assertive](#) female manager is labeled as a "bitch," while her male counterpart is described as "a forceful leader." (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken as a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should occupy nurturing and not [decision-making](#) roles. Women are less capable than men).
- Whistles or catcalls are heard from men as a woman walks down the street. (Hidden message: Your body/appearance is for the enjoyment of men. You are a sex object.)

[Sexual Orientation](#) Microaggressions:

- A Young person uses the term "gay" to describe a movie that she didn't like. (Hidden message: Being gay is associated with negative and undesirable characteristics.)
- A lesbian client in [therapy](#) reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she is "into women." The therapist indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once had a client who was "into dogs." (Hidden message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)
- Two gay men hold hands in public and are told not to flaunt their [sexuality](#). (Hidden message: Same-sex displays of affection are abnormal and offensive. Keep it private and to yourselves.)

Microaggressions can be based upon any group that is marginalized in this society. Religion, disability, and social class may also reflect the manifestation of microaggressions. Some of these examples include the following.

- When bargaining over the price of an item, a store owner says to a customer, "Don't try to Jew me down." (Hidden message: Jews are stingy and money-grubbing.)
- A blind man reports that people often raise their voices when speaking to him. He responds by saying, "Please don't raise your voice; I can hear you perfectly well." (Hidden message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning).
- The outfit worn by a TV reality-show mom is described as "classless and trashy." (Hidden message: Lower-class people are tasteless and unsophisticated.)

The most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group. These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as "small slights," but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in [health](#) care, [education](#), and employment.

What Do Microaggressions Say About Us?

Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions are active manifestations and/or a reflection of our worldviews of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, and desirability/undesirability. Microaggressions reflect the active manifestation of oppressive worldviews that create, foster, and enforce marginalization. Because most of us consciously experience ourselves as good, [moral](#) and decent human beings, the realization that we hold a biased worldview is very disturbing; thus we prefer to deny, diminish or avoid looking at ourselves honestly. Yet, research suggests that none of us are immune from inheriting the racial, gender, and sexual orientation biases of our society. We have been socialized into racist, sexist and heterosexist attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Much of this is outside the level of conscious awareness, thus we engage in actions that unintentionally oppress and discriminate against others.

Let me use an example to illustrate how microaggressions can influence the standard of living and quality of life for women and persons of color. Statistics support the fact that White American males constitute only 33% of the population. Yet, they occupy approximately

- 80% of tenured positions in higher education
- 80% of the House of Representatives
- 80-85% of the U. S. Senate
- 92% of Forbes 400 executive CEO-level positions
- 90% of public school superintendents
- 99.9% of athletic [team](#) owners
- 97.7% of U. S. presidents

The questions we must ask are: "Where are the women?" "Where are the people of color?" "If these are due to racism and sexism, "Who are the culprits." "Are these outcomes due to the overt racist or sexist?" "Are they due to the hate mongers, the White supremacist, Klan or Skinheads?" I contend that it is not the overt racist or sexist which control the tools that result in such unjust and damaging disparities. It is people we elect to office, teachers who educate our children, business leaders who carry out the policies and practices of their corporations, [government](#) leaders, law enforcement officers, physicians, dentists, construction workers, your family, friends, and neighbors. It is well-intentioned people like you and I!