Microaggressions in the Workplace

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Learning Outcomes

- Understand terminology
- Define micro-aggressions
- Discuss awareness of micro-aggressions in the workplace
- Understand some of the possible responses to and impact of micro-aggressions
- Provide ways to address micro-aggressions and reflect on what change HR professionals can make
Social Justice Terminology

- **Diversity** = The presence of difference.

- **Social Justice** = The **process** of social justice involves an equitable distribution of resources, equal access to those resources, and participation from all members of society. The **goal** of social justice is the full and equal participation of all groups in a society shaped to meet their needs.

Important to note: Social justice is **both** a process and a goal.

Social Justice Terminology

- **Identity** = Aspects & characteristics that make up our definition of self; what aspects & characteristics society defines us by.
  - Agent/Dominant = Those identities that experience privilege.
  - Target/Subordinate = Those identities that experience oppression.

- **Privilege** = Unearned, unasked for, often invisible benefits and advantages only readily available to agent groups.

- **Oppression** = System that maintains advantage and disadvantage based on social group memberships. Operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels.

**Levels of Oppression**

- **Cultural**
- **Institutional**
- **Individual**

**Individual Oppression:**
Personal attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that maintain and perpetuate oppression.

- Examples: believing people with mental disabilities are not capable of working, telling homophobic jokes, throwing a sexist theme party, etc.

Institutional Oppression: Social institutions like media, education, health services, and government that maintain and perpetuate oppression through laws, practices, policies, and norms.

- Examples: marriage being legal only for heterosexual couples, public schools more racially segregated than in 1950s, etc.

levels of oppression

Cultural Oppression: Values, norms, societal expectations, ways of thinking and ways of knowing that form institutions and individual patterns of oppression.

- Examples: standards of beauty that are unrealistic for women, narrow definitions of gender expression, etc.

Aversive Oppression: Subtle, often unintentional, belief that one does not discriminate, usually views self as a “liberal”

- Possesses unconscious stereotypes and biases
- If those feelings are conscious, there is an attempt to dissociate from those feelings

Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000
“Microaggression” Defined

- **Microaggression**: Subtle, verbal and nonverbal slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages directed toward an individual due to their group membership, often automatically and unconsciously. Usually committed by well-intentioned folks who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated.
Microaggressions Defined

-Microaggressions in everyday life

Dr. Derald Wing Sue – Microaggressions are similar to carbon monoxide – “invisible, but potentially lethal” – continuous exposure to these type of interactions “can be a sort of death by a thousand cuts to the victim”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAIFGBLEsbQ
Types of Microaggressions

- **Microinsult**: Often unconscious verbal, nonverbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's heritage or identity
  - Examples: asking a student of color which scholarship they received for admittance to college, joking that you cannot give female office worker constructive feedback or she’ll cry

- **Microassault**: Conscious and intentional discriminatory actions on one’s identity
  - Examples: flying a confederate flag, denying child from dating someone of the same sex, using derogatory names

- **Microinvalidation**: Communications that subtly exclude negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person’s identity
  - Examples: color blindness, myth of meritocracy, denial of individual homophobic experience

*Taken from: Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Equilin, 2007*
Microaggression Process

Phase One
- Incident
  - An event or situation experienced by the participant

Phase Two
- Perception
  - Participant’s belief about whether or not the incident was racially motivated

Phase Three
- Reaction:
  - Participant’s immediate response to the incident
Microaggression Process

Phase Four
- Interpretation
  - The meaning made of the incident

Phase Five
- Consequence
  - Behavioral, emotive or though processes which develop over time as a result of incident

Incident Types
- Verbal
- Nonverbal/Behavioral
- Environmental
You shouldn’t come to the construction site. You’re a distraction and it’s hard for us to get work done. It’s not your fault so don’t take it personally, but that’s just the way men are. Why don’t you stay in the office and I’ll check on you later?”
“But what would you think if someone came in with purple hair?”

- A HR consultant when I was seeking advice on how I should go about discussing the harassment and discrimination I have dealt with concerning my natural afro-textured hair at my job. I do not wear braids, locs, or twists. Nor do I cut my hair or dye my hair in unnatural colors (I keep it brown). I ONLY wear my hair out...like any other women at my job. Made me feel upset, insulted, and without a voice. Even someone who was suppose to help didn’t understand how natural my hair is and instead compared it to an unnatural color.
“When are you going to have some kids? You know you’re not getting any younger.”

- This is what a co-worker said to me after learning that someone we both know is expecting a child. What if I can’t have children? What if I don’t want children? Why don’t people think about that before speaking?
“I asked a colleague to perform a simple task that is required of him. He responds with ‘it must be that time of the month, scary.’ I ask him what female hormone levels have to do with his ability to carry out his job. He responds ‘You sound like my wife’. I am a 29 year old broadcaster. Made me frustrated, angry, tired.”
“Wow, you’re really good at this!”

Male co–worker, in a tone of great surprise, at seeing me use a screwdriver to open my PC because the hard drive had failed. I’m female, 24, and I have a master’s in computer science. Made me feel undervalued, like he’s expecting less of me because of my gender.
“Don’t worry about Mr. ________. He’s just extremely Jewish.”

- This was said to me by an employee on my first day at a location as the assistant manager. It was after I attempted to deal with a difficult customer who refused my help because he didn’t recognize me. The employee did not know at the time that I was raised Jewish.
“OMFG! It’s like little Mexico beneath my floors! New neighbors moved in below us and all I hear are babies crying and the bass of latino music!”

- From a Facebook post from a fellow counseling colleague from work.
“I mean, I’m all for feminism... but I just worry that if women all join the workforce, birth rates will plummet and the human race will go extinct.”

- Male, approx. 50-year-old coworker to me, 23-year-old female. Made me feel like he was marginalizing feminism using the excuse of a (scientifically unsupportable) claim. When I suggested that the world was, if anything, overpopulated, he ignored this.
“One of my coworkers is messing with another coworker by ‘accusing’ her of being gay. She’s furious with him. Meanwhile, I’m sitting there, being gay.”

- During my shift at a customer service job. Made me annoyed, depressed.
“I know what I just said sounds prejudiced, but I’m really not.”

- My coworker, putting his hand on my arm after he suggested that only black people would vote again for Obama because he’s black.
Psychological Implications of Workplace

- Anxiety—
  ◦ The employee experiences a dread of going to work, loses sense of identity with his/her work or career, may experience physical problems

- Paranoia—
  ◦ The self-consciousness created by second-guessing of others, worry about the racial and gender attributions of others, fear of damage to one’s reputation

- Depression—
  ◦ Depression is common in social or work withdrawal, isolation from coworkers, feelings of fatigue and exhaustion from even minor work tasks
Psychological Implications of Workplace

- **Sleep Difficulties**—
  - While correlated with depression, this cluster of symptoms is generally likely to occur first.

- **Lack of Confidence**—
  - The worker begins to question their abilities, judgment, and decision making.

- **Worthlessness**—
  - This feeling is related to a lack of confidence as the person now questions their value to coworkers, the company, and to themselves.
Psychological Implications of Workplace

- **Intrusive Cognitions**—
  - These are the constant and continuing thoughts that are replayed over and over in the mind of the person.

- **Helplessness**—
  - This feeling of powerlessness occurs in the workplace when the individual is unable to stop the microaggressions.

- **Loss of Drive**—
  - The person’s energy, spiritual and psychological, is sapped through chronic workplace microaggressions.
Psychological Implications of Workplace

- False Positives—
  - Because of the constant and continuing feelings of harassment and put downs, the person begins to overgeneralize to coworkers or others all the negative experiences that they have had with others. Such an orientation has the unintended consequences of
    - Further isolating oneself to others,
    - Increasing mistrust—“everyone is out to get me,” and
    - Externalizing blame in a way that avoids personal responsibility for one’s own actions.
Impact of microaggressions

- Increase benefit utilization – census data
- Use of EAP, but info not coming to HR
- Stalled recruitment
- Lower morale and engagement
- Lower productivity
- High or unexplained Turnover
Recruitment

- Examine applicant requirements and essential functions
- Awareness of Environmental microaggressions

- “Good oral communications skills”
- Pictures of all male management team in the reception area or on the web.
Careers aren’t built in a day. But they can be launched in one.

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Low retention rates may be the result when minority groups are constantly bombarded by organizational policies, practices, programs, and structures that make them feel unfairly treated (Sue, Lin, & Rivera, 2009)

Micro inequities like:

- Speaking to employee in condescending tone (second-class citizen)
- Not responding to a co-worker’s ideas (invisibility)
- Not invited to lunch by coworkers
- The boss mispronouncing employee name
Peer to Peer

- Bullying experienced by employees of color, women or LGBTs is described as:
  
  “subtle and often unconscious manifestations of racism in the form of incivility, neglect, humor, ostracism, inequitable treatment that cause extreme distress and has a negative impact on work productivity.”  (Fox & Stallworth, 2004)
Supervisor/Supervisee

- Lower life and job satisfaction
- Lower organizational commitment
- Lower morale and motivation
- Lower self-esteem

Behaviors:
- Isolation
- Withdrawing from work
- Lower work productivity
- Working minimal hours despite tasks being incomplete
Disadvantage in:
- Networking
- Mentoring
- Access of flow of information important to advancing one’s career

Performance Appraisals
- Definitions of leadership and managerial potential
- Serve as gatekeeping functions that determine who is hired retained and promoted.
Work environments
- Philosophy/vision statements and values

Example:

*We define a multicultural organization as committed (action as well as words) to diverse representation throughout all levels, sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive, and responsive environment, working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its ongoing operations, carefully monitoring organizational polices and practices to the goals of equal access and opportunity and authentic in responding to changing policies and practices that block cultural diversity.*  

(Sue & Constantine, 2005, p.223)
1. True multiculturalism and diversity must be at all levels.
2. Organizations must create and maintain an open and supportive environment, free of microaggressions.
3. Authenticity and commitment must be present.
What can HR do?

- Hearing the voices – not dismissing, allowing voices to be heard
  - Creating space where concerns can be raised without ramifications

- Coalition building/networking amongst identity is encouraged and supported
HR continued

- Commitment from top, but role modeling throughout

- Diversity Action plan w/ clear goals
  - Oversight team w/ investment empowered to assess, develop, monitor
Our tips

Accountability must be built in

- “Systematic and long term commitment to educate the entire workforce concerning diversity issues, to address barriers the block multiculturalism, and increase sensitivity at all levels to the manifestation and power of microaggressions.”
Tips continued

- Needs to include everyone – boards, administrators, senior leadership
  - Needs to be a long term process

- Multicultural vs. we’re all the same – Diversity statement
Questions?

Thank you!
Microaggressions in Everyday Life
Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation
by Derald Wing Sue