


Chapter 1

The Fine Line: Defining, Identifying, and Confronting Microaggressions in Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

Although the existing literature assures us that a blurred line between macro and microaggressions exists, one point is made very clear, microaggressions are real and empirical studies have consistently shown the adverse psychological effects toward the target individuals that are far reaching and can have long-lasting, negative often devastating effects. But how do the experts define microaggressions and its many components, what are some methods and approaches used to perpetrate this slight, why is there such ambiguity and what can be done to combat this action?

MICROAGGRESSIONS

“Maria, a Latina woman, visited a doctor’s office for a routine check-up. The doctor spoke slowly and simplified his language, assuming Maria might not understand English well, despite her having been born and raised in the United States. Maria felt belittled, and the interaction reinforced the stereotype that all Latinas are recent immigrants with limited English proficiency (Hall et al., 2015)”.

The above scenario cuts to the heart of microaggressions. Although the physician felt he was attempting to be helpful toward the patient, in reality his words and actions left Maria feeling demeaned. In this case it was the unconscious response from

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the doctor toward Maria and all Latinas as a group, possibly from prior experience or simply from unconscious cultural bias within his own community, that elicited Maria's emotional response of humiliation. After reviewing much of the literature on this subject, it has become clear that there is in fact a lot of misunderstanding and confusion toward what is and what is not considered a microaggression and often there is a very fine line between the two.

Although the existing literature assures us that this blurred line exists, one point is made very clear, microaggressions are real and empirical studies have consistently shown the adverse psychological effects toward the target individuals that are far reaching and can have long-lasting, negative often devastating effects. But how do the experts define microaggressions and its many components, what are some methods and approaches used to perpetrate this slight, why is there such ambiguity and what can be done to combat this action?

Concept of Microaggressions, its Evolution and Founders

The term "microaggressions, was first coined by Dr. Chester Pierce in his seminal work "The Black Seventies" in 1970 (Williams, et al., 2020). Pierce was a pioneering figure in psychiatry, education, and race relations, becoming a prominent professor and psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. He received his Bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1948 and later earned his medical degree from the same institution in 1952. As an African-American professor and physician, he not only faced but also addressed issues of race and discrimination throughout his life, ultimately making a huge contribution to the study of mental health and social psychology (Harris, 2017). His book was a culmination of his studies explaining the conscious or unconscious "subtle blows that are relentlessly delivered by white offenders during their interpersonal interactions with black individuals" and he called these subtle blows micro-aggressions, which he linked to greater disease and mortality rates in black communities (Pierce, 1970).

The study of microaggressions has evolved significantly from when it was first introduced by Pierce. For example, an article from the American Psychologist (2007) expanded its meaning to include "everyday interpersonal or environmental exchanges that convey offensive, hostile denigrating exclusionary, or demeaning messages to people because of their social group membership, particularly people from less powerful or stigmatized social groups." It should also be noted that the term "microaggression" could be misleading in that "micro" may lead to a false belief that the attacks are slight or trivial in nature, but nothing could be further from the truth (Clark & Spanierman, 2018).

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