


# Chapter 10

## Challenging the Status Quo: Strategies for Confronting Microaggressions

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Challenging microaggressions occurs on a continuum of efforts, from individual to individual reporting and coalition demands to larger unifying demonstrations for systemic change. A near reflection of the polarizing efforts of the civil rights movement to be peaceful or aggressive, documented and suggested methods to confront microaggressions range from kindness to transforming organizational culture. Are there advantageous ways of confrontation that emancipate African Americans in higher education to remain, flourish, and accumulate the necessary social capital to make real change? African Americans in higher education can point to myriad microaggressions, direct and implied, delivered in jest or false humility, with options for address. This chapter explores ways to confront microaggressions that exist on a continuum of actions ranging from direct individual responses to appealing to governing bodies for organizational change.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Douds and Hout (2020), “Black people experienced significantly more frequent microaggressions than other Americans experienced. Twenty-eight percent of Black people experienced disrespect weekly or more, compared with

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twenty percent of all Americans” (p. 532). As an African American professional in higher education, how does one confront microaggressions? There is not one answer nor one plan. What exists in the literature is a range of proposed solutions, including thought leadership, kindness offensives, boundary setting, and layers of interventions. Microaggressions require addressing for their lingering effects beyond the initial interaction. Targets experience mental, physical, and professional effects. There are actions the individual target can take, and there are actions that teams and organizations can employ to identify, educate, expose, potentially reduce and eliminate microaggressions in higher education. Dr. Derald Wing Sue (2017) said that the study of microaggressions is “a study of powerful emotions, subjective experiences, biases, values, and beliefs, as well as especially the pain and suffering of oppression” (p. 171). Thus, more than counting must occur to quantify microaggressions. Storytelling and the documenting of those stories has to happen to qualify the experiences.

The decades-long microaggressions discussion continues with intersections across fields of work and ways to recognize, disclose, and counter the behaviors. Aggressors may mean well and speak without malice or harmful resolve. Or, aggressions may target persons as a means to a variety of ends. Targets stand against the aggression of other persons, groups, systems, and organizational cultures and must decide how to respond. Add these scenarios to a higher education context. Compound everything with African American lenses, and a perfect storm results for assessment and concern. Intention of aggressors notwithstanding, confronting microaggressions in higher education is necessary. Regardless of the nature of the situation where microaggressions happen, the method of address and the subsequent conversations that ensue require leadership qualities commensurate with the professional and social vulnerability, systemic concern, and the personal risk.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The discussion on confronting microaggressions spans many years and offers specific situational responses. Regarding cultural aggressions, Black et. al (2023) noted that the complexity and uniqueness of microaggressions make some microaggressions easier to identify than others (p. 466). Some of the detailed solutions and recurring themes for how to oppose microaggressions tie to different starting points of rationale. In addition to race, age, ability, gender, language, sexuality, and other participant self-reported areas are the systemic factors of microaggressions

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