

# Chapter 13

## Unseen Barriers: The Reality of Microaggressions in Academia

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the impact of microaggressions in academic spaces through an intersectional lens, emphasizing how race, gender, class, and other identity markers shape unequal experiences. While academia often assumes access to knowledge, it frequently fails to act on it, allowing microaggressions to persist and go unchallenged. These subtle forms of discrimination (e.g. verbal, behavioral, and environmental) reinforce systems of power and negatively affect mental health, academic success, and a sense of belonging, particularly for people of color. This chapter highlights microinterventions as effective tools for disrupting bias and fostering inclusion. It calls on faculty, staff, and administrators to share responsibility in creating safe*

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*learning environments. Despite recent rollbacks in DEI policies, academic institutions must remain committed to equity, ensuring all students have the opportunity to thrive without the burden of navigating prejudice alone.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Definition of Microaggressions**

Chester Pierce (1974), a celebrated African American psychiatrist and professor, originally refers to microaggressions as Black–white racial interactions often involve subtle denigrating behaviors by white individuals, enacted in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious ways. He, among others, would refine this definition in Pierce et al. (1977) where he later defines microaggressions as Subtle, often automatic, and nonverbal interactions that convey disparaging or devaluing messages.

Sue et al. (2007) later expanded the definition of microaggressions in a seminal paper as Frequent and normalized verbal, behavioral, or environmental affronts—intentional or unintentional—that transmit hostile, derogatory, or racially charged messages to people of color. Not only did this newer definition seek to include all people of color, but it also clarified the types of microaggressions that existed (behavioral, verbal, and environmental) and gave future researchers a foundation to study from by classifying various forms of racial microaggressions.

However, other scholars would critique the definitions of microaggressions within both its methodological basis and its ability to be translated into meaningful scientific or academic findings (Haidt, 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017; Ong & Burrow, 2017). Lilienfeld (2017) especially critiqued the foundational assumptions of the research behind microaggressions, listing construct validity, testing items, demographic selection, and many other issues preventing microaggression research from having scientific rigor.

Sue (2017) responded to Lilienfeld’s critiques with a call towards recognizing that microaggressions are more difficult to objectively define within scientific studies due to the differences between empirical reality demands and experiential reality experiences. He notes that as a topic, microaggressions are inherently complex due to their subjectivity and lived experiences and are diametrically opposed to the objective demands of psychological sciences. With previous research in mind and as a response to Lilienfeld, Williams (2017) redefined microaggressions as Subtle and often defensible manifestations of racism that sustain pathological racial stereotypes and reinforce systemic social inequalities and defended the ability of research surrounding microaggressions to be accurate and valuable to scientific aims.

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