

My name is Elizabeth Wynn. I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute. And I'm going to be giving you a quick introduction to microaggressions today.

So the term microaggression was coined by a psychiatrist, Chester M. Pierce, in 1970. He defined microaggressions as “black-white racial interactions that are characterised by white put downs done in an automatic, preconscious or unconscious fashion.” And he was defining microaggressions in contrast to macroaggressions, things like lynchings, beatings, those sort of hate crimes.

Since 1970, there has been more research done in this area and the definition has been expanded. So a current definition of microaggressions would be “brief and common verbal, behavioural and environmental communications, whether intentional or unintentional, that transmit hostile, derogatory or negative messages to a person because they belong to a marginalised group.” So that's quite an academic and dense definition so let's break down those key characteristics.

Small, most the time when we're talking about microaggressions we're talking about a single sentence.

Common, the frequency of microaggressions is one of the factors that makes them most harmful. It's that sort of death by a thousand cuts. Or another analogy, if you prefer, is someone stepping on your toe. The first time it happens, it's not a particularly big deal. The 20th time it happens, it's very painful.

Microaggressions are subtle. That ambiguity can make them hard for the person experiencing them to put their finger on why exactly they're why exactly they feel harmed by them. And it can make the perpetrator completely unaware of the fact that they've said something harmful.

Unintentional. I put this in brackets because though it's very common for microaggressions to be unintentional, sometimes they aren't.

Harmful. So microaggression, you'll see in the examples that I give that these are quite small comments and it can be difficult to see the harm to them. But it really is that cumulative effect. Repeated exposure to microaggressions can lead to lower performance, lack of confidence, anxiety and depression. So they really do have strong negative effects.

So since the term was coined, one of the most prominent researchers in this area is Derald Sue, and with his group, he came up with a categorisation of three types of microaggressions. I'm going to go through these quickly. So the three types they came up with: micro assault: explicit, verbal and nonverbal, derogatory remarks or actions; micro insult: subtle remarks about a person's marginalised identities that are insensitive, demeaning and rude; micro invalidation: an experience that excludes, negate and nullifies a person's marginalised reality. So I don't expect you to memorise or fully dig into what these mean. The reason I've mentioned these here is when I go through the examples, I think it can be useful to think about the fact that it's these three types of areas. That's how the harm is being caused. So assault, insult or invalidation.

I'm now going to go over some examples and it would be completely impossible to go over an exhaustive list. So these are just going to be a few common examples that will hopefully be helpful for you to start recognising what type of thing we're talking about as microaggressions.

So starting with examples around race and ethnicity, I've organised these into themes, examples and the underlying message. So the theme of being alien in one's own land. Some examples of this would be "You speak English really well." "Where are you really from?" And the underlying message with that is that you're a foreigner. You're not really from here.

Colour-blindness. "I don't see race." "I don't think of you as a black person. I think of you as a person." So these might seem positive but the underlying message is that you don't have different experiences based on your race or ethnicity. So anything you perceive as being racist is in your own mind.

Denial of individual racism. "I'm not racist. I have BME friends." "As a woman I understand what discrimination is like". So in saying this, the speaker is implying that they are immune to racism, to committing racism or being racist. And on that note of "As a woman, I understand what discrimination is like." On the face of it there are some similarities between being discriminated against for different reasons. But there are differences as well, and you can't exactly equate them. And also, being a member of a marginalised group doesn't give you a pass on, it doesn't mean you can't discriminate on any other factor.

So in order to prevent this talk being entirely, all these examples being entirely text, I also have some images. So these type of campaigns have become fairly common and illuminating. I think this one is from Fordham University where students were asked to write things on board that they've been told. And unlike the previous examples, which were sort of presented in the abstract, these are people's real lived experiences. So "Why do you sound white?" "Can you see as much as white people? You know, because of your eyes?" "So like, what are you?"

Moving on to examples around LGBTQ+ issues. On the theme of dismissal. "She used to be bisexual, but now she's married to a man." "There are so many identities now. What is demisexual anyway?" The message here being that sexual orientation or gender identity isn't real. And you might hear people being, you know, dismissive of certain pronouns that people want to use. Oh, it's ridiculous. Why is it so made up? But you need to respect how people identify.

Invasion of privacy. This is especially depressingly common and relevant to trans people. For example, "Have you had the surgery?" But can apply to all LGBT folks like, "Have you come out to your parents yet?" And the message here is that I have a right to know personal things about you, that your personal private experiences are our public property. It's fine for strangers or acquaintances to ask you these personal questions.

Universal LGBTQ plus experience. "You don't dress like a gay person." "Did you watch the latest episode of Drag Race?" So this assumption that gay or queer people act in a specific way, suggests that if you don't behave like that, you aren't a real queer person.

So now some photo examples. "Someone to my girlfriend and me. I'm conservative, but don't worry, I'm fine with you, too. Thanks?" This middle one is a bit hard to read, perhaps. "Wow. I would never have known you used to be a girl." "You don't look queer."

Moving on to examples surrounding gender. Myth of meritocracy. So an example of this, "The best person should get the job regardless of gender." So if you don't succeed, it's due to your effort, not your gender. And the corollary of this, if you do succeed, it's due

to your gender, not your effort. “She only got the job because they wanted to hire a woman.” So believing that women get special treatment in hiring and promotion.

Environmental examples. So rooms or buildings that are all named after men, only portraits of men on the walls, only men in the textbooks. That sort of thing. The message is you are an outsider here.

Second class citizen. Assuming a woman is more junior than she is, like assuming in a hospital that the woman you meet is automatically a nurse rather than the doctor. And the underlying implication with that is that someone like you cannot be high status.

So I have had these different themes for each of these categories, and some are unique to those categories, like colour-blindness is unique to race and ethnicity, but not all of them are. There's definitely a lot of overlap. For example, myth of meritocracy. You could equally say “The best person should get the job regardless of race” or, you know, denial of individual racism could very easily be denial of individual homophobia. “I have gay friends”.

Moving on to visual examples around gender. “Wow. Majoring in computer science is pretty great for a girl.” “Given what your husband does do you really need to work?” “Stop being so emotional.”

Now, these examples I've given, for some of them, they might have made you think, “Wow, I never would have thought how that could be harmful. But explaining like that hopefully now you see. But for others, you might think that's just normal, standard sexism or racism. Why do we need the term microaggression?”

The size and ambiguity of microaggression makes them hard to recognise and easy to dismiss. So a common criticism of microaggression is that people are just too sensitive, they're blowing things out of proportion. And even for individuals experiencing them, as I said earlier, sometimes a person might think, “Am I reading the wrong thing into that? Am I being, am I being just crazy for thinking this?” But the cumulative effect of them is damaging. So having a word for this, being able to identify and label microaggressions helps us address them and recognise systems of oppression.

So because microaggressions are very often expressions of unconscious bias it's important to understand them in that context. And by tackling micro aggressions, if it's part of the whole thing, you can't you can't try and get rid of racism or sexism or ameliorate the negative effects in isolation.

The final part of this talk, I'm going to go on to some tactics for dealing with microaggressions, so because a lot of micro aggressions are discrimination, a lot of the tactics for dealing with them are the same general ones you would use for dealing with any type of discrimination. So I'm going to try to give some specific tips for microaggressions by focusing on their unique characteristics: the size and subtlety.

So what to do if you experience microaggressions? First of all, remember that your experience is valid. It might be a small thing, it might be something you're not sure the intention behind it. But if it harms you, your experience is valid. Don't necessarily second guess yourself.

Come up with tactics for frequent occurrences. Because microaggressions happen so quickly, they're so small, it can be difficult to think how to react in the moment. So if there's something that you encounter often, it's useful to come up with specific responses for that. So, for example, Derald Sue, the researcher I mentioned earlier, is East Asian and he has shared how he often gets the comment, "Your English is really good." And his response to that is to say, "Thank you. I should hope so. I've been speaking in my whole life." So having a prepared response will help you react in the moment.

Consider the circumstances and outcome. So what I mean by this is it's easy to feel angry when you experience microaggressions. It's that 20th time someone steps on your toe. It hurts, you're upset, you're angry. And that's valid. However, because so often the perpetrator doesn't recognise why what they've done is harmful and in their perspective it might be such a small thing, I think it's important to consider the circumstances and what outcome you want to get out of the situation. And unfortunately, that does sound like I'm saying, you know, you should always take the high road. But considering the circumstances and outcome, especially if it's at work, it's people you need to see all the time. It can be detrimental if you do lash out at someone who you have to work with. And I think this is the, you know, coming up with tactics for

frequent occurrences as well, coming up with, thinking beforehand about tactics that will help you get the outcome you want, which is hopefully people learning and not doing the same thing in future.

So what to do if you witness a microaggression? Like any kind of discrimination, it's great if you can challenge it. If you saw my talk last week, I talked about tactics for challenging discrimination. So direct intervention: changing the subject. Addressing it at a later date. Bringing it up with a manager or someone who has more authority to deal with it. Challenging discrimination isn't always easy, especially depending on the circumstances. So, again, preparing responses for common occurrences is a good idea. For example, if you notice in your lab meetings that someone like a woman or a person of colour is often interrupted or spoken over, having some prepared responses to say, for example, "I don't think that they were finished speaking actually," or "I'd like to hear what they had to say." can be helpful.

Another thing is be an ally. So specifically, what I mean by this is believe the person's experience. It's very easy to minimise microaggressions. Saying, "I think you're being a bit sensitive. I'm sure they didn't mean anything by it." That really invalidates the person's experience. So believing and supporting them is a powerful thing to do.

I would also say follow their lead. So if they just want to vent to you and they don't want to make a big deal of it, follow their lead. If they have ideas on how you can help them and how you can be more supportive, follow their lead on that.

What to do if you perpetrate a microaggression? If someone point out to you that that's what you've done, it is not fun to feel that you have done that. No one wants to harm someone else and especially no one wants to be racist, sexist, homophobic, anything like that. So your first immediate reaction will probably be to be defensive. So my first tip is don't be defensive. Take a breath, get your hackles down. Get into an open mindset to think about that interaction.

So apologise and reflect. If someone tells you that you've harmed them apologise to them and reflect on the situation. Put yourself into their shoes. Be aware that maybe it's that this might be the straw that broke the camel's back. It might be the cumulative effect of hearing that type of thing. Not just the one off that makes it so harmful.

Be aware of your own biases and privilege. So a definition of privilege I like is that privilege is the things we don't see. So by being aware of and being vigilant about your own unconscious biases, that makes it more likely that these sort of unconscious expressions of bias won't come out.

Learn. So doing research is a great way to learn and learning again, the more you know about this sort of thing, the less likely you are to make mistakes around it. So do research. I've, maybe some of the examples I've given have prompted you to learn more about something. I have some links at the end of this, which I'll be tweeting out later. You might want to read it, but it's not just academic. Microaggression, we're really talking about people's lived experiences. So interacting with people who are different from you is a very powerful way of learning. Broadening your horizons in that way.