Identifying and Addressing Microaggressions

GEORGE BROWN POLYTECHNIC Anti-Racism, Equity, and Human Rights Services

What are Microaggressions?

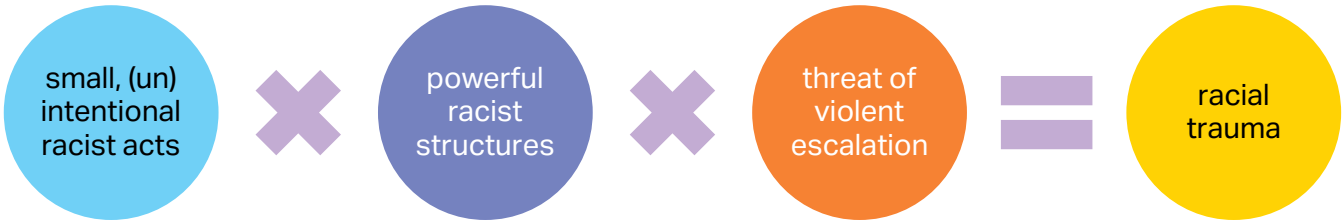
A microaggression is a subtle racist insult, be it verbal or through a gesture, directed toward Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people (as well as other marginalized groups) in a number of circumstances, either knowingly or unknowingly.

These insults can come in many forms: a security guard following a Black patron around a store; a professor requesting a nickname for an international student instead of learning to pronounce their name; a person telling a Black woman that she's "pretty for a Black girl." These are all examples of microaggressions. Each of these actions and comments subtly tell racialized people that they are different and don't belong in a White-privileged society.

It is important to note that the "micro" at the beginning of the word microaggression is not a measurement of the size or quality of these offences. It signals that this type of aggression takes place on the micro-level (i.e., relationally, between individuals) rather than the macro-level (i.e., institutionally or structurally, through the structures within George Brown Polytechnic, classrooms, clubs, unions, and meeting rooms). This often makes microaggressions more difficult to recognize, pinpoint, or prove.

Microaggressions are problematic because they are often done with little awareness of the underlying meanings and negative effects of the interaction. When a Black, Indigenous or other racialized person experiences a microaggression, there is a residual feeling of being uncomfortable, or a feeling that they have been disrespected or attacked.

Microaggressions can seem like small, isolated incidents, but when this type of aggression is experienced multiple times daily it can result in serious trauma known as racial trauma. For many Black people, dealing with racial trauma all day, every day is demoralizing, harmful, and exhausting.



Types of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can be broken down into three types:

Microassaults

Microassaults are explicit racist or discriminatory actions or comments meant to hurt Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people. These are not innocent or unconscious. They are deliberate, targeted attacks, and typically includes racial slurs and derogatory actions.

Microinsults

Microinsults can be conscious or unconscious, but always has an underlying racist message for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people. These comments and actions are often informed by systemic racism in society and based on common racist stereotypes. If a White person were to tell a Black woman that they're "pretty for a Black girl," this would be a microinsult suggesting that this individual has approached the White standard of beauty.

Microinvalidations

Microinvalidations are made up of communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential realities of Black, Indigenous, and/or other racialized people. When people in the Black community are told that "I don't see color" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to minimize their racial and cultural experiences.

How to Combat Microaggressions

Letting microaggressions pass without comment tells everyone that you have no problem with what they express. Intent matters when we want to call someone in. Impact matters when we center those who are harmed. People being harmed do not know your intent.

Confronting microaggressions may result in a defensiveness, but it is important to actively combat racist behaviour when you are able. One way to address these racist comments is to ask for clarification on the comment and challenge the person to consider the impact of their words. For more resources on bystander intervention, access righttobe.org.

For example, if someone were to say, "our colleague doesn't act Black," ask what they mean. By asking this question, it forces the person to examine what they're saying. This challenge may raise their awareness that they are reinforcing the idea of what "acting Black" means based on harmful stereotypes and white supremacy.

George Brown policies state that all employees should immediately report incidents of discrimination or harassment that they witness or have knowledge of, or where they have reason to believe that discrimination or harassment has occurred or may occur.

People who have experienced discrimination or harassment are encouraged to come forward to report. Reach out to OAREHRS at diversity@georgebrown.ca.

Microaggressions in context

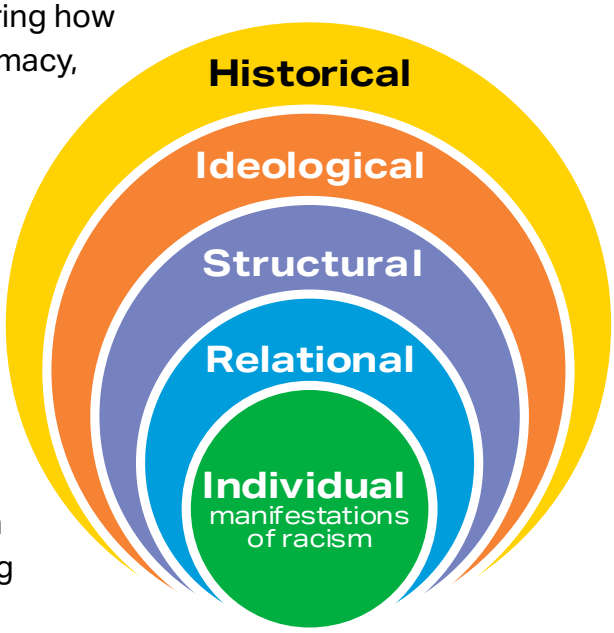
Racism operates at all levels, from our own implicit biases, through our unconsciously-motivated actions, to policies and practices that disproportionately affect people marked by race. This is why we call racism **systemic** – all these levels interact and perpetuate each other, targeting racialized people for exclusion in all parts of life.

On the **individual** level, we hold and enact biases and assumptions as individuals, whether conscious or unconscious. Confronting individual racism requires working against our racist biases and internalizing different ways of valuing ourselves and the people around us.

On the **relational (micro)** level, the ways we interact (including through microaggressions) and form relationships marginalize people of certain groups. Confronting relational racism requires actively challenging our peers, friends, and family on how we interact and spread ideas that oppress racialized people.

On the **structural (macro)** level, our environments, policies, and practices produce inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, even with "colour-blind" or non-racist intent. Confronting structural racism requires identifying inequitable outcomes around race and changing policies and practices that produce them.

On the **ideological** level are our patterns of thought and rhetoric, shaped by cultural and political narratives that shape what ideas we consider to be possible or worthwhile. Addressing ideological barriers means reconsidering how legacies of enslavement, colonialism, white supremacy, and the construction of "race" shapes what we consider normal, and what might be feasible actions or solutions to confront racism.



Historical racism produces continuous and reverberating effects of oppression over time, through the long-term impacts of systems (e.g., residential schools, segregation, redlining, displacement) and the generational trauma they produce. Confronting historical racism asks us to recognize past harms, trace their impacts through to now, and work to interrupt them from continuing into the future.