

What exactly is a microaggression?

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An image from the "I, Too, Am Harvard" photo campaign. | I, Too, and Harvard

An Asian-American student is complimented by a professor for speaking perfect English, but it's actually his first language. A black man notices that a white woman flinches and clutches her bag as she sees him in the elevator she's about to enter, and is painfully reminded of racial stereotypes. A woman speaks up in an important meeting, but she can barely get a word in without being interrupted by her male colleagues.

There's a name for what's happening in these situations, when people's biases against marginalized groups reveal themselves in a way that leaves their victims feeling

You may have heard the term if you've read up on psychology, the academic field where the term was born, or if you've spent time perusing **Twitter** and **Tumblr**, where it's had a recent resurgence.

The renewed embrace of the concept has aggravated some who think "microaggressions" simply describes situations in which people are **being much too sensitive**. At the same time, it's also provided a common vocabulary for those who want to put a label on the specific type of daily indignities they face. And in a society in which explicit racism is frowned upon (and thus, not a daily problem for most people) but implicit biases are going strong, there's probably more use for it now than ever before.

The word "microaggression," like the behaviors it describes, is probably going to be with us for some time, so it's worth understanding what it means.

What makes microaggressions different from other rude or insensitive actions or comments?

Microaggressions are more than just insults, insensitive comments, or generalized jerky behavior.

They're something very specific: the kinds of remarks, questions, or actions that are painful because they have to do with a person's membership in a group that's discriminated against or subject to stereotypes. And a key part of what makes them so disconcerting is that they happen casually, frequently, and often without any harm intended, in everyday life.

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This is how psychologist **Derald W. Sue**, who's **written two books on microaggressions**, defines the term: "The everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations or those who are marginalized experiences in their day-to-day interactions with people."

As he explained in the video below, which provides an overview of the concept,

about a group of people (as in the example above, about the Asian-American student's English, or when a lesbian is told, "You don't look like you're gay!")

Where did this term come from, and why are we suddenly hearing it so much?

Back in the 1970s, **Harvard University** professor **Chester M. Pierce** coined the term "microaggression" to describe the insults and slights he had witnessed against black people.

He **wrote**:

These [racial] assaults to black dignity and black hope are incessant and cumulative. Any single one may be gross. In fact, the major vehicle for racism in this country is offenses done to blacks by whites in this sort of gratuitous neverending way. These offenses are microaggressions. Almost all black±white racial interactions are characterized by white put-downs, done in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion. These mini disasters accumulate. It is the sum total of multiple microaggressions by whites to blacks that has pervasive effect to the stability and peace of this world.

The word was revived, mostly in academic circles, and applied to other minority groups when Sue, a professor of psychology at Columbia Teacher's College, **began using it in his writing around 2007.**

Given the way social media gives a rare platform to a lot of the same groups who field these sorts of daily insults, it's caught on and has become a popular topic of discussion on Twitter and Tumblr, especially among young people.

Harvard University students' "**I, Too, Am Harvard**" campaign — a collection of photos and testimonials about the microaggressions black students experienced — was hugely popular. There are Tumblrs dedicated to chronicling microaggressions at colleges including **St. Olaf University, Swarthmore College, Oberlin College, Dartmouth College,** and **Smith College,** too.

PEOPLE HAVE EMBRACED IT BECAUSE IT DESCRIBED THINGS THAT ARE REALLY HAPPENING TO THEM

Here, students quote the things people have said to them ("You're so lucky to be black — so easy to get into college," and "You can't be a woman if you can't reproduce,") and vent about their frustrations with the types of comments they have to field ("What are you?' is not an introduction").

In an **April 2014 interview with USA Today**, Sue that he was happy to see the term go "mainstream" and said he'd noticed that college students found microaggressions "experientially true." In other words, people have embraced it because it described **things that are really happening to them.**

How do microaggressions actually harm people?

Research has shown that microaggressions, although they're seemingly small and sometimes innocent offenses, can take a real psychological toll on the mental health of their recipients. This toll can lead to anger and depression and can even lower work productivity and problem-solving abilities.

MICROAGGRESSIONS CAN EVEN CAUSE PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Plus, they can affect a work or school environment, making it more hostile and less validating and perpetuate stereotype threat (the fear of confirming existing stereotypes about one's group, which can have a negative impact on confidence and achievement).

None of this is hard to imagine if you simply consider how it would impact your life if you felt like you were subject to a constant stream of insults and slights and were always bracing for or recovering from an offense. It's not just about being upset, though: some **researchers have found** that microaggressions can even cause physical health problems.

Are microaggressions the same as racism, sexism, and homophobia?

They are based on some of the same core ideas about people who are minorities or are marginalized in America (for example, that they're not smart, that they don't belong, or that they make good punchlines), but microaggressions are a little different from overtly racist, sexist, or homophobic acts or comments because they typically don't have any negative intent or hostility behind them.

Sue explained in his video primer on the topic, "People who engage in microaggressions are ordinary folks who experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals.

Microaggressions occur because they are outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator."

"It (is not) the overt racists, the white supremacists, the Klan, the skinheads," he told **USA Today**. But, he clarified, in some ways, this makes them all the more dangerous. The outright bigots, he explained, "are less likely to affect the standard of my living than individuals who are well-intentioned — educators, employers, health care providers — who are unaware of their biases."

"PEOPLE WHO ENGAGE IN MICROAGGRESSIONS ARE ORDINARY FOLKS"

In this way, microaggressions are closely tied to **implicit biases**, which are the attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions that we're not even aware of, that can creep into our minds and affect our actions (also known as, "**thoughts about people you didn't know you had.**")

A person with implicit bias against black people might have trouble connecting "black" with positive terms on the **Implicit Association Test**, a computerized test designed to measure how closely we associate certain topics in our minds. It's fair to guess that that same person might be someone who gets a little nervous — and shows it — when she first sees a black man in the elevator she's about to enter. So, more than expressions of conscious prejudice or intentional bigoted statements, you can think of microaggressions as implicit biases come to life in our everyday interactions.

And yes, just like we all harbor various prejudices, we've all probably subjected someone to a microaggression at some point in life.

Are people who complain about microaggressions being too sensitive?

In some camps, there's intense hostility to the idea that an "innocent" remark would ever be labeled problematic. All you have to do is glance through the **comments** on Sue's [YouTube video on microaggressions to see examples of this attitude](#)

Here's one: "I have to say the analyzation of micro aggression is annoying to me. Our society is a society of over sensitive people. What happened to being intelligent enough to understand that people are going to react, and sometimes do inconsiderate things. It is my feeling that our society will never be eutopean enough to completely eradicate micro aggressions. Therefore the sooner we stop wasting energy on pointing out natural human behaviors, the sooner we can put that energy to better, more productive fields of study."
(sic)

And **another one**: "As we say out my way, Eat some concrete and harden the fuck up princess. Fuck your mico microaggression, i'll give you some real aggression." (sic)

Some of these reactions are more thoughtful and come from Sue's peers in academia. In rebuttal letters to his 2007 American Psychologist article on microaggressions, some accused Sue of blowing the phenomenon out of proportion and manufacturing the perception of harm where none exists.

"Implementing his theory would restrict rather than promote candid interaction between members of different racial groups," Kenneth R. Thomas, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, **told the American Psychological Association Monitor**. Thomas, a white male, said he believed that "the [microaggression] theory, in general, characterizes people of color as weak and vulnerable, and reinforces a culture of victimization instead of a culture of opportunity."

THIS CRITICISM SEEMS TO FIT INTO A LARGER CONVERSATION ABOUT MULTICULTURALISM AND "POLITICAL CORRECTNESS"

This criticism seems to fit into a larger conversation about multiculturalism and "**political correctness**" in which opposition often includes an underlying disbelief in the seriousness of the claims of marginalized people or a sense that it is too much trouble or impractical to cease the behaviors that they say cause them harm.

What do I do if I want to avoid subjecting people to microaggressions?

STOP FOR A BEAT AND THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE WEIGHING IN ON SOMEONE'S IDENTITY

It's not very hard to put some thought into the biases you might hold, become curious about the way your words and actions are perceived by others, listen when people explain why certain remarks offend them, and make it a habit stop for a beat and think before you speak, especially when you're weighing in on someone's identity.

In his video on microaggressions, Sue offered five suggestions for things individuals can do to avoid them:

1. Be constantly vigilant of your own biases and fears.
2. Seek out interaction with people who differ from you (in terms of race, culture, ethnicity, and other qualities).
3. Don't be defensive.
4. Be open to discussing your own attitudes and biases and how they might have hurt others or in some sense revealed bias on your part.
5. Be an ally, by standing personally against all forms of bias and discrimination.

Bonus tip: Peruse the many examples of microaggressions that have been chronicled in articles, in academic research, and using social media. Once you hear about how they affect people, chances are, you will be more aware of what they look like, and suddenly much less likely to repeat them.

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