

Mind the Microaggressions

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June 4, 2024

Today

- We will use a two-part case study (a scenario) to learn about hostile, derogatory or negative situations that can make a person feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, like they don't belong, etc.
- More precisely, situations where the person is from a marginalized identity (holds less power because of dominant ideology).
- When caused by a person's actions or words (an *interpersonal* form of oppression), these situations are called "microaggressions."

Disclaimers

- We do not pretend to have all the answers.
- Those might be difficult topics, feel free to step out if needed.
- We will start with some norms for participation in this workshop.

Norms for participation in this workshop

- Maintain a learner stance and remain open to new thinking
- Speak your truth, and listen to the truth of others
- Be aware of intent and impact
- “Three before me”
- If you offer a critique, be prepared to be critiqued
- Accept and expect non-closure

Adapted from Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

A Brave Space

- We hope your work today will help you reflect on things you might have said or done yourself, or have heard around you and didn't think too much of. You will need to be brave, and vulnerable.
- Of course this might also remind you of your own experience. You will need to be brave, and accept discomfort.
- For those reasons we need this space today we are sharing to be a brave space. This is not meant to be a safe space.
- Those might be difficult topics, feel free to step out if needed.

See Arao & Clemens: "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces" (p. 140-141).

The process, part 1

- We'll read part 1 of the situation together (based on a true story).
- Have a look at the reflection questions, and discuss them in your group (introduce yourselves if you haven't had a chance). You'll have about five minutes for this.
- Prepare to share some take-aways with the whole audience.

Suggestion: have the person who gets the *least* bitten by mosquitoes take notes on their sticky note. Have someone else be the reporter (the person who will speak up for your group).

The situation, part 1

On a typical day in the middle of the semester you come in the department early. It's pretty quiet. As you walk in the hallway, you overhear the following:

V1: Someone who is usually very quiet in class and never comes to office hours came to complain to me after class yesterday.

You recognize that voice: it belongs to someone teaching another section in the same course as you. You keep listening:

The situation, part 1 (end)

V2: What was the complaint?

V1: See here, their first exam did not go well: almost no reasoning is shown, so I took a lot of points off.

V2: That seems like a correct solution though...

V1: Sure, but we always ask students to write out their reasoning, it's even part of the rubric. So after getting back the exam, this student asked me why they lost so many points for not writing down "trivial work." The student was very upset.

V2: I can see how someone might think this was easy enough and there was no need to justify. Have others complained?

V1: No, but I think that's the only one who did this.

V2: That seems strange, let's look at this other student's exam...

V1: Oh yes that one is a great student!

V2: Hmm, seems like your "great student" is not writing much either...

V1: Oh sure, but they know the stuff. This student participates a lot in class, tutorials and office hours. They're doing great in the course.

Questions for reflection

- 1 Why is the student “very upset” about losing points on their exam?
- 2 What are some factors that may have contributed to the situation between Voice 1 (“V1”) and the “quiet student” having developed that way?
- 3 Did you notice any microaggression(s) in this story?

Questions for reflection

- 1 Why is the student “very upset” about losing points on their exam?
Grades are important, whether we like it or not — to continue in program, for scholarships etc. Helicopter parents? And being unfairly treated is upsetting in any case.
- 2 What are some factors that may have contributed to the situation between Voice 1 (“V1”) and the “quiet student” having developed that way?
Maybe student compared to friend’s exam? What are accepted ways to show your understanding in this course? Why is that student quiet, in that course?
- 3 Did you notice any microaggression(s) in this story?
There’s an injustice for sure. But quiet people are not marginalized in our society?

The process, part 2

- We will now read part two of the situation, along with the new reflection questions.
- As before, when your team is ready, discuss the situation and your answers to the questions.

In ten minutes we will come back together as a large group to discuss.

Suggestion: have the person who gets the *most* bitten by mosquitoes take notes on their sticky note. Have someone else be the reporter (the person who will speak up for your group).

The situation, part 2

The next week, a student whom you've seen a few times before at your office hours and with whom you are developing a good working relationship comes to your office hours again. The student stays after others are gone, and reveals to you his fear that his instructor may have a bias against people with disabilities. You've noticed before that the student seems to have paralysis in one hand. After talking to the student more, you realize he is probably the "quiet student" you overheard "Voice 1" talk about the other morning.

Questions for reflection

- 1 Can you now think of other reasons why that student was “very upset” about losing points on their exam?
- 2 Why would the student think their instructor is biased against people with disabilities (the instructor is “ableist”)? Was there a microaggression in this situation after all?
- 3 Do you think this incident is an isolated case for the student?
- 4 Name a few reasons why someone might be quiet in class, and why this particular student might be quiet in this particular class. What are some factors that may contribute to the situation between “Voice 1” and the “quiet student” having developed that way?

Further questions for reflection

- 5 Did you assume the gender, race or other characteristics of the various people in the situation, when those characteristics were not stated?
- 6 What if the student, instead of being a man with a disability, was Indigenous, or a white woman? Or had another gender identity? Or was a student for whom English is a second language?
- 7 What if the student already felt unwelcome or alienated, or like they didn't fit in the school or department? What if instead the student felt very much part of the school or department? Would that change their feelings about the situation, or their interpretation of what happened?
- 8 How would you address this issue with "Voice 1"? How would you address this issue with the "quiet student"?

Stereotype Threat

- Stereotype threat is when one worries about confirming negative stereotypes about one's marginalized identity.
- This can happen when someone feels they are asked to represent or speak for all people of their identity.
- This worrying takes cognitive power away from other tasks and can lead to a performance gap.

A lot more has been said, and done, about stereotype threat and how to (try to) mitigate it. See references.

Note: some people have more than one oppressed or marginalized identity.

Intersectionality

- Remember that an identity situates a person, in a society, as having more or less power (because of the dominant ideology)
- Intersectionality refers to the fact that some people identify with more than one marginalized group
- Hence someone can be oppressed based on more than one part of their identity.
- This creates an even greater difference in the effects of oppression, and potentially makes it even more difficult for some people to find safe spaces for themselves.

A lot more has been said, and done, about intersectionality. You may explore it further in the references.

The Mosquito Example

A mosquito bite is annoying but not usually a big deal.

But have you ever been that person who gets bitten a lot, while everyone else is enjoying their day at the park?

How did you feel in that moment? How did you react?

How did you want to react?

- Lash out at the mosquitoes, be visibly or audibly upset.
- Wish mosquitoes would leave you alone.
- Feel like there is something wrong with you; feel overly sensitive.
- Wish you could be with people like you, and never see mosquitoes again. But your job requires you to be at the park everyday.
- Think that parks are just not for you, leave and never come back.
- Tell your friends, children to never go to that park. Or any park.

Mosquito Bites and Microaggressions

What does a person who is the target of microaggressions, day after day, in a math setting, want to do? How does that person feel?

- Lash out, be visibly or audibly upset.
- Wish people would leave them alone.
- Feel like there is something wrong with them; feel overly sensitive.
- Wish they could be with people like them, and never see white people / men / rich people / heterosexual people / able-bodied people / etc ever again. But their job or program of study requires them to interact with these people everyday.
- Think that math is just not for them, leave and never come back.
- Tell their friends and children to never do math.

Microaggressions add up

And would you blame that person?

That's why **safe spaces** are important. Those are places where people can expect to *not* be targets of microaggressions, where people can breathe and heal without fear of more “mosquito bites” (or worse).

But even a single microaggression *is* a big deal actually. It perpetuates harm and injustice. Also, receiving (or even witnessing) a microaggression triggers a physical and emotional response that you go into and need to come out of.

That is why we need to recognize when we are being the mosquitoes — or even first, recognize when others are being the mosquitoes to a third party.

Recap

Let's reflect on what we did together today. This work takes intellectual humility, open-mindedness and acceptance of different perspectives.

Take a quiet minute or two to yourself to do a “3-2-1 Takeaway”:

- What are 3 takeaways you have from today's workshop?
- What are 2 questions you have?
- What is 1 next step you intend on taking after reflection?

Thanks for participating!

Let me know if you would like slides, references, extra resources...
even a homework on this!

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