Microaggressions in a Time of Trauma: Engaging Empathy with Colleagues as a Form of Antiracism

ALAO Annual Conference, Virtual 2020  
Chris Robinson-Nkongola and Edith Scarletto  
Reference & Instruction Librarians  
Jerome Library  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, OH
Introduction

- Trauma
  - COVID 19
  - The killing of Black people by police during COVID 19
- Racial Microaggressions
  - Definition
Microaggressions in a Time of Trauma: Engaging Empathy with Colleagues as a Form of Antiracism

Racial Microaggressions Defined
COVID 19 by Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that impact health — including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and increased exposure to the virus due to occupation (e.g., frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate ratios compared to White, Non-Hispanic Persons</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic persons</th>
<th>Asian, Non-Hispanic persons</th>
<th>Black or African American, Non-Hispanic persons</th>
<th>Hispanic or Latino persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases</td>
<td>2.8x higher</td>
<td>1.1x higher</td>
<td>2.6x higher</td>
<td>2.8x higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitalization</td>
<td>5.3x higher</td>
<td>1.3x higher</td>
<td>4.7x higher</td>
<td>4.6x higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>1.4x higher</td>
<td>No Increase</td>
<td>2.1x higher</td>
<td>1.1x higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Killing of Black People during COVID 19

- Ahmaud Arbery - 02/23/20
- Breonna Taylor - 03/13/20
- George Floyd - 05/25/20
What are Racial Microaggressions?

“The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and the recipient”.


- Are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.
- Racial microaggressions can be environmental where a BIPOC is unintentionally exposed to an office environment that assails their racial identity.
- According to Derald Wing Sue, et. al "Almost all inter-racial encounters are prone to microaggressions."
Taxonomy of Microaggressions

- Microassaults
- Microinsults
- Microininvalidations
Microassaults

- Conscious and deliberate
- Referred to as “old fashion racism”.
- Call someone the N-word
- Refusing to serve a POC
- Displaying the hood of the Ku Klux Klan
- Displaying the Confederate Battle Flag
The most recent and well-known microassualts
Themes within the attitudes and behaviors of Microaggressions

- **Microinsults**
- Alien in One’s Own Land
- Second-class status
- Ascription of Intelligence
- Assumption of Criminality
- Pathologizing cultural values and styles

- **Microinvalidations**
- Myth of Meritocracy
- Environmental Invalidation
- Denial of individual racism
- Color blindness
BIPOC are not Crazy or Too Sensitive

- **Empirical Evidence proves that Racial Microaggressions exist**
The Effects of Microaggressions

- Depression
- Poor performance at work and school
- Isolation
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling of Powerlessness
- Self-doubt
- Racial rage
- Racial Battle Fatigue
- Keeps White people from seeing a different racial reality and participating in establishing racial harmony
References


Further Reading


Engaging Empathy using Nine Why’s

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Part II: An interactive reflective exercise

Reflective document for use during this part of the presentation (anonymously)

https://forms.gle/HT6ZA89HkuBfoxni9

View and reflect on the answers of your colleagues

What is empathy?

*noun*

the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.

the imaginative ascribing to an object, as a natural object or work of art, feelings or attitudes present in oneself: *By means of empathy, a great painting becomes a mirror of the self.*

*Dictionary.com, noun*
Why is empathy important in the workplace?

- Our workplaces mirror our world
- Situations in the world affect our colleagues
- Pandemics and protests in our world can mirror and exacerbate the conflicts/inequality in our workplaces

How might personal events affect you at work?

- Stress of being a caregiver for a loved one
- Family or loved one who passed
- Financial difficulty
- Moving, you or a family member
- Relationship difficulties
- Unrest or unease within your organization

*Use the reflection form to reflect on these events in your own life*
Consider some world and national events

• September 11th
• Hurricane Katrina/ Florence
• Iowa/ Maryland Flooding
• California wildfires/Mudslides
• Space Shuttle disasters
• Virginia Tech/Pulse Night Club/Church shootings

*Use the reflection form to reflect on these events in your own life
What kinds of empathy can we express?

• ‘affective’ component – vicariously taking on others’ feelings
• ‘cognitive’ component – reasoning about others’ emotions
• ‘motivational’ component – desiring for others’ emotional states to improve

How has the pandemic affected us?

• Know or be someone who has been sick?
• Know someone who is extremely vulnerable to illness
• Know someone who lives with someone who is vulnerable

*Use the reflection form to reflect on these events in your own life
We can’t know everything about our colleagues

We can be aware of events around us and reason, or express cognitive empathy

The events of the pandemic give us many opportunities for empathy
While situations affect us differently consider the ways colleagues may be affected.

Know or be someone who has been sick

Know someone who is extremely vulnerable to illness

Know someone who lives with someone who is vulnerable
Now let’s talk about race and antiracism

Just like natural disasters, race relations and racist events affect us and our colleagues differently.

Colleagues who are black or people of color may experience these events more intensely than white colleagues.
George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor & Covid-19

You may not have experienced some of the world events mentioned earlier.

You may not have experienced racial microaggressions before.

You may not be vulnerable to Covid-19.
Empathy does not require experience

You can understand that stress from world events may cause stress to your colleagues who are more connected to the event.

You can understand that black folks and people of color are disproportionately dying or becoming ill from Covid-19

You can understand that many things happen to our colleagues we do not know, but you can still extend empathy.
Historical Trauma

• Just as you can empathize with trauma that is not your own

• You can experience trauma by frequent reminders of triggering events
Vicarious Trauma

“an event that “bring[s] up an array of painful memories. . . it can trigger vicarious traumatization. Even if the specific event has never happened to us directly, we may have witnessed similar experiences, or know people in our communities who have been traumatized or killed in similar ways.”

Empathy as a form of antiracism

• Just as you can empathize with trauma that is not your own natural disasters and world events

• You can empathize with folks who experience trauma by frequent reminders of triggering events repeated acts of violence against people of color
Antiracism

• Be aware of your workplace and how it appears to colleagues who may be experiencing the trauma of the pandemic and/or racist violence in the news.
• Be aware of and envoke empathy for, microaggressions as they happen.
• Rehearse responding to microaggressions.
Antiracism

"An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. “Racist” and “antiracist” are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos"

Antiracism

To do antiracist work is to continue to act against structures and actions that reduce our empathy for our colleagues.

It means constantly decentering white experience as the norm of the world and the workplace.

It means making mistakes, recognizing those mistakes and acting to change them.

It means extending empathy to black colleagues and colleagues of color in work situations as well as personal.
What do empathy and microaggressions have in common?

- Fiske's Core Social Motives
  - To belong to a group
  - To understand the world around us
  - To control what we can
  - To trust in the group
  - To self enhance (self worth)

Confronting microaggressions

When we feel defensive, we feel that one of our social motives has been challenged.

Empathizing with a colleague can help address the issue that prompted a microaggress
How can empathy about a social motive help?

What has challenged the person speaking rudely?

What can the receiver say to address that concern or assumption?

*Use the reflection form to reflect on these events in your own life*
Summary

• Using empathy to understand trauma can help us to care for our colleagues in a time of crisis.
• Racism and racial trauma can be experienced through vicarious and historical triggers.
• Decentering the white experience and acknowledging the experience of colleagues through empathy can become antiracist.
• Empathy can also be a tool to confront microaggressions and racism in the workplace by applying to social motives.


