

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

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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).

Rate ratios compared to White, Non-Hispanic Persons	American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic persons	Asian, Non-Hispanic persons	Black or African American, Non-Hispanic persons	Hispanic or Latino persons
Cases	2.8x higher	1.1x higher	2.6x higher	2.8x higher
Hospitalization	5.3x higher	1.3x higher	4.7x higher	4.6x higher
Death	1.4x higher	No Increase	2.1x higher	1.1x higher

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”.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *The American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286.
doi:10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

- 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
- Microinvalidations

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**
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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

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Further Reading

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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

<https://bit.ly/30G4UZ9>

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

Gibson, A., Chancellor, R., Cooke, N., Dahlen, S., Patin, B., & Shorish, Y. (2020). Struggling to Breathe: COVID-19, Protest, and the LIS Response.

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

Zaki, J. (2016;2017;). Moving beyond stereotypes of empathy. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 21(2), p.59. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2016.12.004

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.”

Kendall, M. (2020). Hood feminism: Notes from the women a movement forgot. New York: Viking.

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 invoke 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"

Kendi, I. X. (2019). How to be an antiracist. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu>

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)

Have, S., Rijsman, J., Have, W., & Westhof, J. (2018). The social psychology of change management (1st ed.) Routledge.

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 act
- Empathy can also be a tool to confront microaggressions and racism in the workplace by applying to social motives

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