

## **Micro Aggressions in Real Time**

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### **Abstract**

*The term micro aggression is defined and demonstrated from the viewpoint of graduate-level students. Using a classroom assignment, the students describe their personal experiences of committing or being the recipient of a micro aggression. The students describe the type of micro aggression, theme, psychological dilemma, and recall how they reacted to the encounter. The impact of micro aggressive events on diverse populations is explained. Implications are discussed as well as how mental health professionals can use the client's experience as a tool for empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Micro aggressions, diversity, multicultural issues, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity

Micro aggressions- those inadvertent and subtle messages that demean, insult, and invalidate a person- are routine occurrences for people of color, women, and LGBT individuals, those with physical or intellectual disabilities, older Americans, and non-Christian individuals. Micro aggression is a term coined by Harvard psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978) in his study of racism in the media. Derald Wing Sue and David Sue (2013) extended the definition adding "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to a target group" (p. 150). Micro aggressions are communicated verbally or nonverbally, and intentionally or unintentionally. Micro aggressions tend to occur when the person committing them claims to be unaware of cultural differences, thus denying any intended bias. Because the counselor or mental health professional's relationship with clients is a snapshot of our racial realities, micro aggressions can occur within this relationship. Greene and Blitz (2012) found that micro aggressions against people of color and LGBT individuals seeking mental health services result in clients being subjected to more scrutiny, being misdiagnosed, receiving ineffective treatment, and being misunderstood- thus having their needs unfulfilled.

In my Social and Cultural Diversity Issues in Counseling course (I am an assistant professor of Clinical Mental Health Counseling), I began using one of the activities from Sue and Sue's fifth edition of "Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice" (2013), in which students searched and identified micro aggressions in the media and presented their analysis. While I thought this would be an interesting assignment for my students, I did not imagine how they, or even how I, would react to the many instances of micro aggressions that occur on a daily basis. The impact of this assignment was so powerful that students were still discussing it after the semester was over. I decided to repeat the activity over subsequent semesters, including additional assignment directives such as student reenactments of a counseling session in which a micro aggression was used in the course of the session. I also had students writing or videotaping narratives of their experiences being the recipient of, or committing, a micro aggression in real-time. They were to identify the type of micro aggression, theme, dilemma, and how they felt as a target or contributor of the experience. The students also pointed out what they would do differently if they encountered a micro aggressive event in the future. The micro aggression's assignment proved to be a revelation for the students and educated us on the daily prevalence of these subtle or overt messages that offend and invalidate the recipient.

### ***Types of Micro aggression Incidents, Themes, and Dilemmas***

The students identified several types of micro aggressions in their assignments. Micro aggressions are categorized into three subtypes: micro assaults, micro insults, and micro invalidations. Micro assaults are blatant, deliberate, verbal and nonverbal attacks intended to express discrimination. Micro insults are rude, unintentional actions or comments that demean a person's racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, or religious identity.

Micro invalidations are comments or behaviors that discount, question, or diminish the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or worldview/reality of the recipient. Sue and Sue (2013) developed 16 distinct categories of micro aggression themes and designated the subtle (or blatant) message being conveyed by the implications including Second Class Citizen, Traditional Gender Role Prejudice and Stereotyping, Criminality/ Assumption of Criminal Status, and Anthologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles. Students indicated more than one type of micro aggression theme in their project. Sue and Sue demonstrated the impact that micro aggressions inflict on marginalized groups by developing four psychological dilemmas. Dilemma 1 is Clash of Socio demographic Realities that demonstrates the clash of realities of Whites who deny being racist and being capable of discrimination; and minorities who believe Whites are racist and enjoy their position of power and superiority. Dilemma 2 is the Invisibility of Unintentional Expression of Bias that describes how the majority group can inflict a micro aggression and be oblivious of its impact on the targeted individual. Dilemma 3 is the Perceived Minimal Harm of Micro aggressions that refer to the reaction from the person in power being confronted with the micro aggression.

The person in power may feel that the recipient is acting “too sensitive” or touchy. They do not understand why their statements are perceived as harmful. They may even believe the communication was innocent and the recipient should “get over it” or “just let it go.” The fourth dilemma is the Catch-22 of Responding to Micro aggressions that involves the action/reaction of the recipient of the micro aggression. The recipient of the micro aggression may question the situation: They may ask, “Did that really happen? Can I prove that happened? Should I say anything? Will anything happen if I respond?” The receiver considers whether their actions will be negatively interpreted or stereotyped (e.g., being viewed as the “angry Black man”). Self-questioning can be exhausting and can take an emotional and physical toll on the individual. However, by not addressing the micro aggression, the receiver carries the weight of the experience on his/her shoulders, which also contributes to mental health complications.

### ***Assignment Instructions***

In preparing the personal narrative portion of the assignment, I instructed students to videotape themselves giving a personal account of an experience in which they committed or were the recipient of a micro aggression. They had to describe the incident that occurred, indicate the type of micro aggression, applicable theme(s), and the relevant dilemma or dynamic from the chapter. In concluding the assignment, I asked them to recall how they handled the encounter, their feelings about the experience, and what they would do differently if another encounter occurred.

### ***Student Personal Narratives***

The following are my students’ account of micro aggressive events. The students either were the recipient of a micro aggression, or committed a micro aggression against another person. Although the students gave their permission, initials are being used. Links are also provided for students who complete a video narrative. LG is an African American female who experienced a micro insult with the theme of Assumption of Criminality. This illustrates the Catch 22 Dilemma of responding to a micro aggression. I was insulted while shopping at a department store. I was not particularly dressed for shopping. I was going to purchase an outfit to wear for an evening event taking place that night. I found several items that I needed to try on, so I asked for the young lady that normally assists me. I was told it was her off day. I was also told I could only carry a limited number of items into the fitting room. I have shopped in this store since they opened and have never been told that before.

I picked out approximately 25 items to try on. I took four or five items in to the fitting room at a time. When I finished with the first set of items, I then asked her to bring the next set of items that she was holding at the register for me until I completed trying on all the items that I had selected. This took about 90 minutes. I knew she was working on commission and she could have taken care of others. I let her ring all those items up and just before giving her my credit card, I informed her that I would come back to the store when the other sales clerk would be there to make my purchases.

I did get angry but I’ve learned not to be the victim, but to be the victor. I refused to let her have that much power over me. I possessed the power. This could have had a negative effect on me but I am confident in who I am at all time. I demand to be treated with dignity and respect, especially when your income depends on me spending my money at your store.

R.C. is an African American female who experienced a micro assault with the theme of Second Class Citizen. She also demonstrates the Catch-22 Dilemma of Responding to a Micro aggression: I am a patient care technician at (a hospital in central Alabama). I assist the nurses, handle vital signs, draw blood, give baths, help patients, etc. One night while at work I was asked to handle a patient's blood work. I gathered everything I needed and went into my patient's room to draw his blood. The patient was a white, middle age male. When I entered his room, I told him what I had come to do and his exact words were, "Get this nigger bitch out of my room now!" I could not believe what he had said to me! My first reaction was to remain calm and proceed to doing my job, but in my head, I wanted to choke him. After I attempted to continue my work, he got louder saying, "Get this bitch out of my room." One of the Whites, male nurses heard all of the fuss and came in. The patient continued to scream as I stayed quiet and drew his blood. When I finished the nurse said, "See she's good at her job, she got it on her first stick." To me, when the patient saw the white male nurse being respectful and nice towards me he calmed down. I guess the patient needed to see how another White person treated me? I did let the patient know that it wasn't nice to be so disrespectful to another human, and when he asked could I hand him something I simply reminded him that I was a "nigger bitch" and closed his door.

So many different thoughts ran through my head when this happened to me. I didn't know if I should've walked out of the room, cursed him out, stuck him on purpose, or ignored him. I decided to take the high road and ignore him. I completed my task in a hurry, but before I left the room, I reminded the patient of what he said to me. I believe I did the responsible thing to ignore him because I know that I'm not a "nigger bitch." I will never forget this day. J.B. is a White female who experienced a micro insult and micro invalidation (theme- Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping). Her reflection illustrates dilemma two- The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias: Serving as an officer in the United States Army was an honor and one of the highlights of my life. During my service, I certainly experienced a lot of sexism as a female in a traditionally male occupation. For instance, I was constantly being asked if I was a nurse. In the early days of women serving in the military, most were nurses, so I was often assumed to be a nurse. What I did not expect was to experience sexism regarding my status as a military veteran.

I am a disabled veteran. After visiting my doctor at the local VA clinic, I had to get a same-day prescription from one of two local pharmacies. I went to the closer of the two and presented my prescription to the male pharmacy technician. He asked, "Does HE need it today?" I said, "I need it today." He replied, "Well, there is no way you can get it before 11:30 tomorrow." I just took the script back and went to the second pharmacy on the list. In the second pharmacy, the female pharmacy technician did not ask me if "HE" needed it filled that day. In retrospect, I do not think that I would have handled the situation any differently. I did not feel like confronting the man about his micro aggression. I might have written a letter to the pharmacy explaining that assumptions such as the one this man made was often harmful to others. In short, the man's assumption "added insult to injury." I have learned to "pick my battles" as I have gotten older, and the most important thing in this situation was my getting my medication to stop the pain I was in at the time. L.T. is an African American female who has a disability. She experienced a micro insult and micro invalidation (theme of Assumption of Abnormality/Brokenness). She illustrates the dilemma of The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias:

Here's an experience I had with someone because of my disability. Having a disability, I have had people who see me in public and assume that I am mentally slow based on my physical appearance. One time when I was in undergraduate and at the beauty shop getting my hair done, this woman was also there getting her hair done. I was talking to my stylist and the woman said something to me. When she spoke to me, she would get in my face and talk as if I had a problem with my hearing. People think that just because my body is different that means I'm also different mentality. I have had someone to ask me if I have MS (Multiple Sclerosis) because my body shakes. I have heard people say, "Aww look at her," like they feel sorry for me and I just want to say, "If you only knew me."

J.W. is an African American male who indirectly experienced a micro insult while reading at the library. The theme detailed was Second Class Citizen, and the dilemmas demonstrated Perceived Minimal Harm of Micro aggressions are Catch-22 Dilemma of Responding to a Micro aggression: An instance where I experienced a micro aggression happened last semester while studying in the library. I had just gotten to the tenth floor to find a quiet spot to read, when I noticed a group of white student having what seemed to be a group study session in the middle of the floor. I walked past these individuals and found a stop nearby on a couch and began to read. While reading, I began to hear chatter about their feelings towards the poor and minorities in our country.

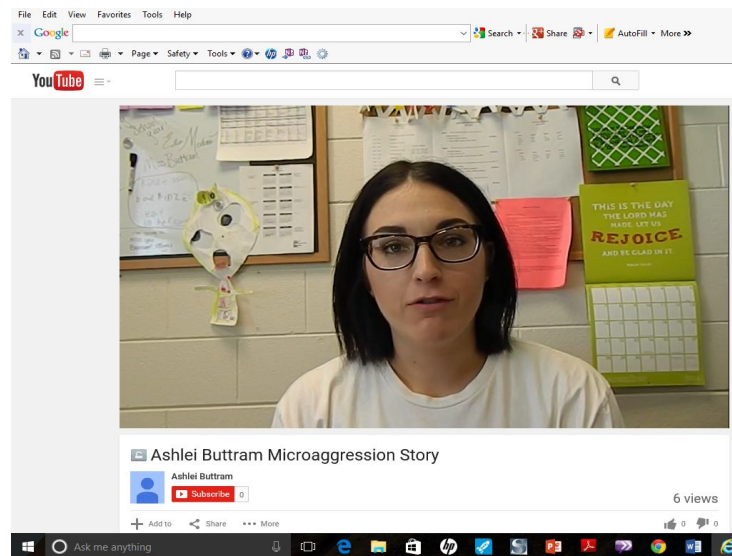
Though I did not like some of their comments, I blocked them out and continued to read. About half way through my reading, I heard of the girls say in a joking way, “Why is it all the little poor black kids on commercials have such big bellies, and have you noticed that they’re usually really dark, like so dark they are Purple.” After making this statement, she began to laugh and her friend chimed in with comments of his or her own.

I was not sure if they had forgotten I was sitting so close or if it was just that, they didn’t care that I was. At this point, I found myself becoming uneasy and irritable. I hopped up from my seat and walked back to the elevator, purposely stepping over one of the individuals lying in the floor. By the time, I had reached the elevator I heard one of the young ladies chuckle and whisper, “He’s been back there the whole time.” One girl apologized and said, “Sorry if we were being too loud.” I sarcastically replied, “Oh y’all are fine, but y’all should be more aware of your surroundings, and yea I know some white folks who are so pale they look sick.” After seeing the look shock on their faces I boarded the elevator went along my way.

My reply was a bit harsh because I was frustrated with the situation and wanted to embarrass them. (The purpose of) my remark was to make them experience some of what I was experiencing while sitting and listening to their conversation. I honestly can say that I probably could have handled the situation differently. Given a second chance, I probably would do the same or worse. This may be an area I need to work on, but tolerance for ignorance has never been a strong suit of mine.

### ***Committing a Micro aggression***

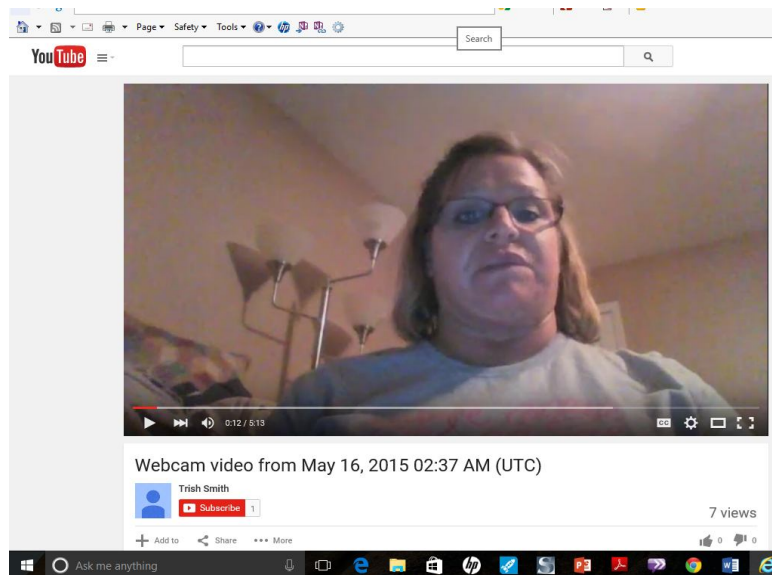
A.B., a school counseling student, is a White female who committed a micro insult against her friend (theme-Ascription to Intelligence) and described how it affected her. The dilemma represented is Unintentional Bias of a Micro aggression (you can view her video narrative at <https://youtu.be/lcLxsUtOMGs>):



I have a best friend who is Hispanic. She is taking this English class. In order for her to advance to the next level of English, she has to pass the Compass test. So she was venting to me about it, and she was nervous because she doesn’t know English as well as other students in her class. She knows it’s important to pass this class in order to make it to the next level. I told her, “It’s okay because you’re Hispanic anyway.” In that moment, I didn’t realize that there was a hidden message.

Her response to me was, “What do you mean by that?” I told her I didn’t mean what I said the way it came out. She told me she felt like I was saying that Hispanics are not capable of being good at English. I explained her to that I knew she struggled because she isn’t good at English. I helped her in English and told her I knew she’s going to pass this test. She said, “I understand and I know you meant that.” She was very forgiving and she did not stay mad at me. I told her I was sorry, very sorry. Even talking about it now, I feel bad. All I could do was apologizing. I am still uncomfortable about what I did. The experience made me feel bad and I still feel bad. I am much more aware of these things and I will try not to do that anymore...

T.S., a school counseling student, is a White female who committed a micro insult against the parents of one of her students due to their religious beliefs. The theme described here is Assumption of One's Own Religion as Normal, and the dilemma is both Catch-22 of responding to a Micro aggression and Clash of Socio demographic Realities (you can view her narrative at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXptVIj5oT4&feature=youtu.be>):



We had a family from Saudi Arabia to come over several years ago to enroll their kids in school. The kids stayed in school for a while. The mother became pregnant and they decided to go back to Saudi Arabia- their religion is Muslim. This year as my first year as a (school) counselor, they came back. It was the year war broke out in their country, and they came back and enrolled their son in school. I knew their daughter had been enrolled in the elementary school, but they were not going to let her enroll because she was (now) 16; and due to their religion, their Muslim belief, they were not going to let her go back to school. She wanted to go back- it was obvious, but they were not going to let her go back. They enrolled the son and during the enrollment process, I got really frustrated and left the room. I guess my micro aggression was a micro insult because I was upset that they were not going to let their daughter continue her education, and in America, and my value is all should be able to get an education regardless. I sort of shunned them for the way they were treating the girl in not letting her go back to school.

I know what I did I was wrong, and I've thought about it since the beginning of the year when it happened; but I didn't know what it was called. I have reflected on it and have come to terms with myself that it's their religion and I have no right to treat them the way I did just because my beliefs are different from their beliefs. It doesn't make what I believe any better. I have had to really work on that. I realize what I did was wrong and it's something I have to work on. Counselors have to realize that.

### ***The Impact of Micro aggressions on Diverse Populations***

The use of micro aggressions on individuals from diverse backgrounds can leave a negative impact on the recipient. "The cumulative effects of micro aggressions foster inequalities, impair relationships, create emotional turmoil, and decrease mental and physical health... Clearly, micro aggressions potentially have a deleterious impact on the victim" (Schoulte, Schultz, and Altmaier, 2011, pp. 291-292). Nadal (2011) found that psychological stress, high blood pressure, depression, sleeping problems, substance abuse, eating disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorders can result from racial micro aggressions. While some researchers suggested that interpersonal racism (e.g., lynchings, cross-burning, and racial assaults) has decreased over the past few decades because of the socially-unacceptable nature of overt acts, biases and prejudices are manifested in more subtle forms. The mental health professional's use of micro aggressions on individuals from different backgrounds can lead to adverse consequences. Fifty percent of minority clients are more likely to prematurely terminate counseling and therapy after their initial meeting with a counselor or mental health professional (Sue and Sue, 2013). It is important to be knowledgeable and understand the physical and psychological impact of committing a micro aggression during these sessions.

Nadal, Griffin, Young, Hamit, and Rasmus (2012) found that the frequency of micro aggression events encountered by clients correlated with depressive symptoms and negative effect. After analyzing the results from the Racial and Ethnic Micro aggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011), and the Mental Health Inventory (MHI; Veit & Ware, 1983), Nadal et al. (2012) concluded that a significant, negative relationship exists between racial micro aggressions and mental health. Depression, anxiety, and having a negative worldview were among the mental health symptoms Nadal et al. found among research participants who experienced racial micro aggressions.

Many people of color refrain from discussions of race with their White counterparts because they feel there will not be an open dialog regarding racial discrimination and oppression. In addition, they feel that their White peers cannot be trusted, and believe that because they regularly experience White racism and oppression, it is only a matter of time before they will also commit a racist or oppressive act towards them. Ross-Sheriff (2012) noted that helping professionals can empower clients who experienced micro aggressions by examining their own use of micro aggressions against a marginalized group and understanding the debilitating effects of micro aggression on a client. Professionals can also acknowledge the micro aggression event their client presents in session and assist the client in developing strategies to challenge the perpetrator of, and mitigate the effects of the micro aggression.

In addition, counselors can establish a trusting relationship by validating the experiences of clients of color and assisting them in coping and confronting micro aggressions when they occur. In assisting clients who have experienced micro aggressions, the counselors and mental health professionals can empower the client to address, advocate, or establish strategies to combat micro aggressions at the workplace, in academic institutions, or in their social environment.

### **Conclusion**

With an increasing diverse population in the United States, micro aggressions are becoming an everyday occurrence. Cultural awareness and introspection are two tools that can help counselors in being cognizant of micro aggressions and addressing slights that may occur in the counseling relationship. It takes a lot for clients to seek services and disclose their personal problems to us. We, in turn, must make the effort to be educated regarding cultural diversity and not play lip-service to cultural competency requirements. It is important that we build our awareness about the detrimental effects of bias towards marginalized groups, play a vital role in validating the client's experience of micro aggressive events, refrain from minimizing the client's account of a micro aggressive experience and perception of reality, and refrain from becoming defensive when our client points out that we have committed a micro aggression.

We all make mistakes, even the most competent practitioners. Aside from becoming defensive, a professional counselor should apologize and take the opportunity to be open to our clients about exploring issues concerning diversity. Openness, not closeness, is the key to correcting micro aggressive errors in the therapeutic relationship.

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