



Microaggressions

What is a microaggression?

The term ‘**microaggression**’ is used to describe everyday **negative behaviours**, that stem from prejudice, **towards marginalised groups**. When directed towards racial and ethnic groups, they can be either deliberate **forms of racism**, or subconscious racist actions[i].

There are three types of microaggressions[ii]:

1. Microassaults - Intentional and conscious racist acts that are distinct from ‘overt racism’ because the perpetrator often doesn’t realise or believe their behaviour is offensive.[iii]

Examples

- Derogatory name calling
- Telling racist jokes
- Being avoidant of a person of colour, for example a taxi driver not picking someone up based on their race or ethnicity

3. Microinvalidation - Being dismissive of the very real struggle of racial inequity. [v]

Examples

- Statements such as “I don’t see colour” and “all lives matter”
- The belief that racism no longer exists. This invalidates the experience of marginalised racial groups, and the impacts of racism.

2. Microinsults - Behaviours that display an often unconscious prejudice against a marginalised group[iv]

Examples

- When people question whether someone’s admittance to a program or job position was to meet diversity objectives
- Assumption of inferiority
- Being suspicious of a person of colour in your store/ workplace/ neighbourhood
- Telling someone they do not look Aboriginal or they are attractive for an Aboriginal person



Microaggressions

Microaggressions are **covert by nature** and present differently to the blatant racial attacks that are generally associated with racism. This makes it **difficult for victims of microaggressions to prove their experience** and have it validated, because people may not understand it as a serious act of discrimination.

The health toll

Racial microaggressions are a significant barrier in the lives of people from racially marginalised groups.[vi] Their regularity takes a cumulative psychological and physiological toll on those who experience them. [vii]

Daily microaggressions shed light on the persistent nature of racism and **challenge the idea that Australia is a 'post-racial' society.**[xii]

It is important to be aware of the existence of microaggressions so they can be acknowledged as racist behaviour and the prejudiced beliefs that cause them can be addressed.

The physical and psychological impacts of microaggressions[viii, ix]:

- low self-esteem and feelings of self-doubt[x]
- depressive symptoms
- anxiety
- anger
- sleep disturbances
- physical health issues such as heart attacks and high blood pressure[xi]



Microaggressions

Call it out



Australia needs to get better at calling people out when they express racial prejudice and racist views. Identifying racial microaggressions can be a powerful tool for dismantling racism[xiii]. [Call it out](#) is a First Nations racism register for witnesses of racism to report it online.

When called out on microaggressions people can become defensive as they are often unaware of the offensive connotations to their comments or actions. Approach these conversations thoughtfully and constructively so you have the best chance of that person being receptive and making changes.

The integration of social justice programs within education, healthcare and workplace institutions can address the factors that contribute to microaggressions and hold people accountable[xiv].

***"Transformation and justice is possible if we continue the work to name, resist, and challenge everyday racism."
[xv].***

To avoid causing further harm to First Nations communities, non-Indigenous people should listen, self-reflect and educate themselves on why their behaviour may be harmful. [xvi]



Microaggressions

Next Steps

- 1 Have a look at our resources page to deepen your knowledge on racism.
- 2 Read our next factsheet on the health impacts of racism.

- [i] Kelsey Borresen, “13 Microaggressions Black And First Nations People Deal With All The Time”, Huffpost, June 18, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/au/entry/microaggressions-black-people-deal-with-all-the-time_au_5eec0b31c5b6385574099778.
- [ii] Proctor, Sherrie L., Jennifer Kyle, Keren Fefer, and Q. Cindy Lau. “Examining Racial Microaggressions, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Bilingual Status with School Psychology Students: The Role of Intersectionality.” *California school psychologist* 22, no. 3 (2017): 355-368.
- [iii] Kevin L. Nadal et al., “The legacies of systemic and internalized oppression: Experiences of microaggressions, imposter phenomenon, and stereotype threat on historically marginalized groups”, *New Ideas in Psychology* vol.63, (2021): <https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2021.100895>.
- [iv] Kelsey Borresen, “13 Microaggressions Black And First Nations People Deal With All The Time”
- [v] Kevin L. Nadal et al., “The legacies of systemic and internalized oppression: Experiences of microaggressions, imposter phenomenon, and stereotype threat on historically marginalized groups”.
- [vi] Perez Huber & Solorzano, “Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research”
- [vii] Pérez Huber, Lindsay, and Daniel G. Solorzano, “Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research,” *Race, ethnicity and education* 18, no. 3 (2015): 297-320.
- [ix] Kevin L. Nadal, “Racial Microaggressions and Trauma”, in *Microaggressions and traumatic stress: Theory, research, and clinical treatment*, The American Psychology Association, (2018), 53-70.
- [x] Perez Huber & Solorzano, “Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research”
- [xi] Melissa L. Walls, “Unconscious Biases: Racial Microaggressions in American Indian Health Care”
- [xii] Ibid.
- [xiii] Ibid.
- [xiv] Proctor, Sherrie L., Jennifer Kyle, Keren Fefer, and Q. Cindy Lau, “Examining Racial Microaggressions, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Bilingual Status with School Psychology Students: The Role of Intersectionality,” *California school psychologist* 22, no. 3 (2017): 355-368.
- [xv] Pérez Huber, Lindsay, and Daniel G. Solorzano. “Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research.” *Race, ethnicity and education* 18, no. 3 (2015): 315.
- [xvi] Kelsey Borresen, “13 Microaggressions Black And First Nations People Deal With All The Time”