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Do We Really Understand Microaggressions?

PUBLISHED 3/4/2022 by **RASHA DIAB** and **BETH GODBEE**

No microaggression I've ever faced felt *micro*. It's
aggression, plain and simple.



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Every week, new stories highlight racial microaggressions in business and workplaces, on campuses, throughout healthcare, and in everyday life. The term “microaggression” has circulated widely enough that it’s recognized as a problem, but the problem is still muddled and mostly invisible. ([Pixahive / Creative Commons](#))

In recent years and especially since summer 2020, in the aftermath and reckoning of George Floyd’s murder, the term “microaggression” has become commonplace. Every week, new stories highlight racial microaggressions in [business](#) and [workplaces](#), on [campuses](#), throughout [healthcare](#), and in [everyday life](#). And now [parenting magazines](#) regularly share advice for explaining the term to children and teaching ways to intervene.

But, as the term has traveled widely, it has been misunderstood, flattened, contested, co-opted and [weaponized](#). As with other terms created to name conditions of injustice, “[microaggression](#)” has been both watered down and blamed for watering down the harms it attempts to name. We’re now at a moment when the word feels too sanitized, too safe and too small. The number of times we’ve turned to each other and exclaimed: “No

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Certainly, the term causes emotional turmoil, and that turmoil is indicative of deeper trouble. The term is losing its meaning. And when we lose track of the meaning, we also lose track of the purpose: to seek justice and end aggression.

Take, for example, the case of our friend, a Latina physician, who called at the end of a hard day to share a story of her white colleagues' disparaging remarks about BIPOC patients. Feeling let down, frustrated, unsupported, disconnected, overwhelmed and deeply sad, she ended the story by saying: "It was awful, but just said in passing. Would that be a microaggression? It feels like something more, but also like nothing at all."

This comment represents the trouble: The term "microaggression" has circulated widely enough that it's recognized as a problem, but the problem is still muddled and mostly invisible. What our friend found empowering is that the term originates in a context similar to her own: that of a healthcare provider experiencing, trying to understand and working to interrupt the impacts of everyday violence on people's health and wellness.

Specifically, in the 1970s, Black psychiatrist [Chester M. Pierce](#) sought to describe everyday violence inflicted upon Black people to explain widespread psychological and health impacts. Pierce's interest in the *micro* was not to divorce it from larger *macro*-level concerns, but to understand how the systemic shows up in specific enactments of violence (there is nothing trivial about these enactments).

Since this early work, clinical psychologists and researchers across disciplines have taken up this term and delineated multiple types of microaggressions, including [microassault](#), [microinsult](#) and [microinvalidation](#). The studies continue to highlight how microaggressions are anything but small: Instead, as a form of violence, they have far-reaching consequences. Just as systemic injustice enables microaggressions

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microaggressions perpetuate systemic injustice. In other words, the micro and macro are intricately related and reinforcing.

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Together, these terms name this violence what it is: *aggression* (and assault, insult and invalidation). And, together, these terms locate the site of the aggression in moments of interaction, or in the “micro-level,” as we say in sociolinguistics and [critical discourse analysis](#). Here’s also where confusion, hurt and ultimately further invalidations come in.

Affectively, many people—not just us and not just our physician friend—are triggered by the *micro* in “microaggressions.” We know why. People feel doubly insulted.

First, *micro* feels like minimizing, trivializing and at the same time dismissing the harm done. *Micro* feels far too small to name the long-standing and largely unacknowledged harms associated with *macro*-level, structural injustice: that is, white supremacy, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy and interconnecting oppression. The hurts are so long-standing, so unacknowledged, and so unrepaired that the preface *micro* cuts deep each time it is repeated. The term becomes repeatedly triggering when it points to the unrecognized *macro* and leaves us lingering at the *micro*

Second, because attention to microaggressions foregrounds single moments in everyday life, it can deflect attention away from the structural violence of the *macro* that makes these moments possible. This happens repeatedly when diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) curricula include scenarios of microaggressions and ask us to intervene as individuals without guiding us toward institutional change. We stay focused on individual interactions without recognizing the larger context in which these interactions happen. Without attending to the larger context, we don't give language to the consequences of these moments and their debilitating weight. We don't allow for recognition of historical and ongoing injustice. We don't connect individual and interpersonal racism with structural and institutional racism—all of which need deep remembering, [reckoning and repair](#). Instead of building the courage and stamina to travel down to the *micro* and up to the *macro*, it becomes more comfortable to deny injustice altogether.

Naming these troubles, we know that this matter is more than intellectual. It's deeply emotional and experiential. Each time "microaggressions" are noted in ways that minimize harm, a spiral of emotions can take over—those same emotions our friend voiced: frustration, irritation, anger, abandonment, insecurity, fear, distrust, betrayal, shame, blame, sorrow and rage. It's not only that the pain of injustice is ever-present. It's also that the term microaggression was created to name this pain and to make visible the many, many moments of invalidation. But, over time, the use, reception and appropriation of the term have become largely invalidating.

So, we find ourselves grappling with the term—both its trouble and its potential. We have repeated conversations, like the one with our friend, which tell us that the term is largely misunderstood, even by feminists committed to racial justice. And we remember the term's historical roots and want to reconnect with what it's designed to do: to highlight the unit of

As scholars of language and communication, we value “microaggressions” for the ability to name that aggression is happening in everyday enactments of violence. So much violence travels up and down the levels (*macro* to *micro*, *micro* to *macro*) that zooming in on the *micro* can magnify the *macro*—if we are willing to understand how everyday moments enact bias, invalidate people and reinforce structural oppression.

Are we willing to understand the relationships among types of harm? Are we willing to broaden our [repertoires for responding](#)? Are we willing to use the term “microaggressions” for righting wrongs instead of maintaining the status quo?

[Naming what we’re for](#) can help detangle what’s usable in microaggressions, but only if we’re willing to get beyond the “micro.” Only if we’re willing to reckon with the distortions of the term, can we get closer to justice.

Up next:



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Beth Godbee, Ph.D., is an educator, writer and former writing studies professor who now offers public education courses, coaching and retreats. She shares new work regularly through her website [Heart-Head-Hands: Everyday Living for Justice](#).

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