

# Microaggressions are a big deal

BY SERENA DYKSTRA

THESE are some things people have said to me once they discover I am an Indigenous person: “Don’t you go to school for free?”; “Must be nice to not pay taxes!” I have also been congratulated for “making it this far in life” because many other “Native people” do not. These are examples of microaggressions, and they are often considered minor.

As a mixed-race Indigenous woman, I’ve also routinely been told I “don’t look Indigenous” or I’m “not like other Indigenous people” because I was born with my father’s last name and skin tone instead of my mother’s. This is also an example of a microaggression.

Derald Wing Sue, author of the 2010 book, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, and professor of psychology at Columbia University’s graduate school of education, defines microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”

Microaggressions can be based on many factors, such as gender, 2SLGBTQIA identity, and ability. A person can experience multiple types of microaggressions, due to the intersectionality of their identities. Racial microaggressions include the following:

- Assuming a racialized person was born elsewhere (this includes asking questions like “Where are you really from?” or telling them they speak English well).
- Attributing a certain level of intelligence to a racialized person, based on their race.
- Using statements of colour-blindness such as “I don’t see colour” or “We’re all the same.”
- Assuming a person is more likely to be involved in a criminal activity based on their race (including holding a purse closer to your body or crossing the street when a person of a certain race is approaching you).
- Denying one’s own racism using statements like, “I have Native friends, so I’m not racist.”
- Rejecting that race plays a role in people’s success in life; including saying things like “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

Perpetrators of microaggressions may often be unaware that they have engaged in a behaviour that threatens and demeans a recipient of such a communication. Unfortunately, these behaviours



ONE CITY,  
MANY VOICES

**The Thunder Bay’s Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.**

are all too common and are often deemed as social norms. But ill intentions are not required to cause harm to a recipient. Saying you were only joking or “didn’t mean it that way” does not reduce the impact of a microaggression. Words spoken unintentionally still carry weight.

Recipients of microaggressions may also not confront perpetrators for fear of being labelled as angry, paranoid, oversensitive or “too politically correct.” In that moment, the recipient is left feeling alone in their experience, feeling the sting of exclusion. These feelings are further compounded when witnesses to microaggressions remain silent.

Issues in Canada and around the world regarding police brutality, anti-Black violence and anti-Indigenous violence are nothing new. Many Canadians are aware of these issues. Violence is an obvious form of racism. But microaggressions tend to go unnoticed. There seems to be an unwillingness to recognize that racism is pervasive in the Canadian national identity. So, when people say “I didn’t realize that was a problem” or “I didn’t mean anything by it,” it’s because white supremacy is so ubiquitous here that people don’t even recognize it as an issue.

As a society, we often believe that racism shows up in a particular way and microaggressions are often thought to be insignificant or even innocent. But the “micro” part of microaggressions doesn’t mean that the effects are small. It just means that they happen on the “micro” level — interpersonally as opposed to systemically. Microaggressions are still blatant, still injurious, and still racist.

You might now be wondering what you can do to address microaggressions in your life. When we think about addressing

racism and other forms of discrimination, we might think about holding a sign, walking in solidarity at a march or attending a sit-in at a peaceful protest. Though these are all important ways of affecting social change, it’s always much easier to be a face in a crowd than to address discrimination, racism and microaggressions while we sit amongst our colleagues in a meeting, while we’re out with our friends or around the dinner table with our family.

We must make a more conscious effort to speak with full awareness and intention. I encourage you to be an ally against microaggressions and not settle for the status quo of everyday behaviours toward marginalized individuals. Thinking about how words matter might be a start.

Naming microaggressions in the moment goes a long way to support the recipient. By naming the act, we are validating that the microaggression and discrimination actually happened. This helps to validate the recipient’s experience, and more importantly, their feelings. It also helps to ensure the recipient feels supported, instead of isolated and alone.

Once the microaggression is made visible to the perpetrator, shift the focus from what the person intended to the impact. You cannot prove intention. By focusing on the impact of the microaggression, you can help the perpetrator understand what happened and how they may have caused pain. Further conversations with the perpetrator are also helpful. Changing our behaviour often happens over time, not in an instant.

And yes, it is exhausting. It is frustrating. But we must continue to stand up and show up, especially in our everyday interactions where “micro” forms of racism are so pervasive. Don’t permit your friends, colleagues, professors, family, or anyone else to fall victim to their own biases anymore. Call them out on it. Being an ally is more than simply attending a large protest or gathering. It’s about showing up for the people in your life, every day.

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