

# Micro-aggressions: Mountain or Molehill?

Robert Shanklin, Ph.D.

Philosophy Department, Santa Clara University

## 1. Definitions & background

- An often-misused term: many so-called “micro-aggressions” are just plain bad behavior or discrimination. Originally, it’s a technical term in psychology from the 1970’s.
- “brief and commonplace ... verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative . . . slights and insults toward the target person or group”<sup>1</sup> (not just verbal, often unaware!)
- Context may determine slight or insult as much as actual comment/behavior/etc.
- Often based on common assumptions re: appearance, name, origin, religion, voice, etc.
- No clear line btw. “real” microagg. & basic rudeness, poor taste, honest mistakes, etc.

## 2. What’s at stake?

- Ethical: unconscious mistreatment of others, perpetuation of problematic social perceptions?
- Legal: could become harassment issue if pervasive and leads to hostile environment.
- Practical & leadership: less efficient teams if some team-members are facing frequent or constant small slights/insults/exclusion/etc.
- Recruitment & retention: folks are increasingly aware of these issues & may not want to work at a firm with reputation for these issues.

## 3. Why molehill?

- It’s too subjective: anyone can be offended by anything. Unrealistic to manage that.
- People need to “grow a skin;” in a diverse workplace there will be differences.
- There is no right not to be offended; perhaps it’s a cost of difference & diversity.
- By definition, they are unintentional & micro. People are too sensitive.

## 4. Why mountain?

- Often pervasive: it’s not about the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> time, but the 100<sup>th</sup> or 1,000<sup>th</sup>.
- Frequent/constant slights can cross reasonable person standard.
- Protected categories are often involved: race/ethnicity, national origin, orientation, identity, religion, disability, age, etc.

## 5. What to do?

- Know what they (really) are.
- Be aware of the sources of objectivity:
  - Maturity is real (different standards reasonable for different maturity/experience).

---

<sup>1</sup> This definition is repeated in legal sources (Wheeler, R. (2016) “About Microaggressions.” *Law Library Journal*, 108:2) as well as clinical/psychological sources: (Sue, D. W., *et al.* (2007). “Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice.” *American Psychologist*, 62). A search for ‘microaggression’ + ‘definition’ yielded 916 peer-reviewed hits.

- Relative authority is real & affects perceptions of acts/speech (supervisor vs. supervisee, executive, etc.).
- History is real (same act can have additional consequences/implications depending on where & when it occurs).
- Separate blame of individual act (unreasonable?) vs. culture/environment (reasonable).
- For supervisors & team leaders:
  - Recognize & resist the impulse to be defensive (makes it worse, clouds the issue)
  - Use self as foil (“did you hear what I just said” / “how I said that” / “let’s unpack”)
  - Avoid inferences from appearance, name, voice, etc. (protected categories!)
  - Don’t fetishize accuracy: grain of truth is irrelevant, focus on connotation.
  - Use meta-linguistic scripts to address the behavior / language: “help me understand why you said /did...,” “what do you mean by...,” “what does \_\_\_\_ mean to you?” “I heard you say\_\_\_\_ did you mean\_\_\_\_?” “Let’s not try to avoid disagreement/difference but handle it like professionals,” etc.)
  - Listen.