



American
Occupational Therapy
Association

Uncovering Microaggressions

Part 1

MODULE 3

Learning objectives

A gold circle containing the text "Micro-aggressions" in white.

Welcome to Learning Module 3: Uncovering Microaggressions and Facing Difficult Conversations. In the last module we learned about addressing unconscious bias. In this module will seek to:

- Define microaggressions.
- Provide examples of microaggressions and unwanted behavior.
- Recommend methods to address both microaggressions and tackling difficult conversations.
- Present tools and resources to identify microaggressions and ways to suppress.

The “isms” & prejudices

Micro-aggressions

Racism, ableism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and discrimination present in many forms and typically fall into two main categories: **overt** and **covert**.



Knowing the difference

Micro-
aggressions

Overt

Overt racism, homophobia, ableism, sexism, and discrimination are identified in obvious ways such as violent attacks, purposeful exclusion, and verbal and physical harassment.

Covert

Covert racism, homophobia, ableism, sexism, and discrimination are concealed or subtle and often difficult to observe and pinpoint.

What is microaggression?

A gold circle containing the text "Micro-aggressions" in white.

The foundation

Chester M. Pierce, MD, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Professor of Education at Harvard University, developed the concept of microaggressions after the Civil Rights era. The term was revived in recent years by Psychologist Derald Wing Sue, PhD, of Columbia University.

Why is this important?

A gold circle containing the text "Micro-aggressions" in white.

Impacted groups

Microaggressions are defined as brief and daily exchanges that act as insults or send demeaning and belittling messages to marginalized groups based on:

- Race
- Gender identity
- LGBTQIA+ identity
- Age
- Physical ability
- Language
- Immigration status

What is microaggression?



Micro-aggressions

Overt racism such as calling someone a racial slur, or overt ableism such as denying employment to a person with a physical or mental disability, is blatant and obvious and most people can't imagine themselves actively participating in this type of discriminatory behavior.

However, when you assume a person of color is not an American citizen or compliment them on their English, or refuse to use a person's preferred pronouns, **you are exhibiting microaggression.**

Why is this important?

Micro-aggressions

Microaggressions seem small, but compounded over time, they can have a damaging impact on a person's experience, physical health, and psychological well-being.



Why is this important?

Micro-
aggressions

Subtle forms of interpersonal discrimination and bias such as microaggressions can be as harmful as explicit or overt expressions of discrimination. Research shows that trying to unravel the meaning or cause behind a statement and the level of frequency with which it occurs, creates stress and depletes cognitive and emotional resources.





Microaggression Types

**Module 3:
Uncovering Microaggressions**



Microaggression Types

Micro-aggressions

Dr. Sue classifies **three** forms of transgressions that demonstrate microaggression:

1. **Microassaults**
2. **Microinsults**
3. **Microvalidation**



Microaggression Types

Micro-aggressions

Microassaults

Intentional behavior that is discriminatory through actions and slurs.

Example: Using racial epithets or serving a White person before a person of color, although it is clear the person of color was next in line to be serviced.



Microaggression Types

Micro-
aggressions

Microinsults

Subtle verbal and nonverbal communications that:

- Convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity.
- Represent subtle insults, often unaware to the perpetrator, but clearly express a hidden offending message to the recipient.



Microaggression Types

Micro-aggressions

Microinsults Verbal

An employee who asks a colleague of color how she got her job, implying she was hired through affirmative action or filling a quota.

Microinsults Nonverbal

A white teacher failing to acknowledge students of color in the classroom or when a White supervisor acts distracted, avoids eye contact, or turns away from a Latinx employee.

Microaggression Types

Micro-
aggressions

Microvalidation

Communications that subtly exclude, negate, or invalidate the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and reality of a person in a marginalized group.



Microaggression Types

Micro-
aggressions

Microinvalidation Exclusion

When a person with a physical disability is ignored or given poor service at a restaurant and shares their experience with a person without a disability and is told “I didn’t notice that” and “you’re being overly sensitive or petty,” the experience of the person is being diminished and voided.

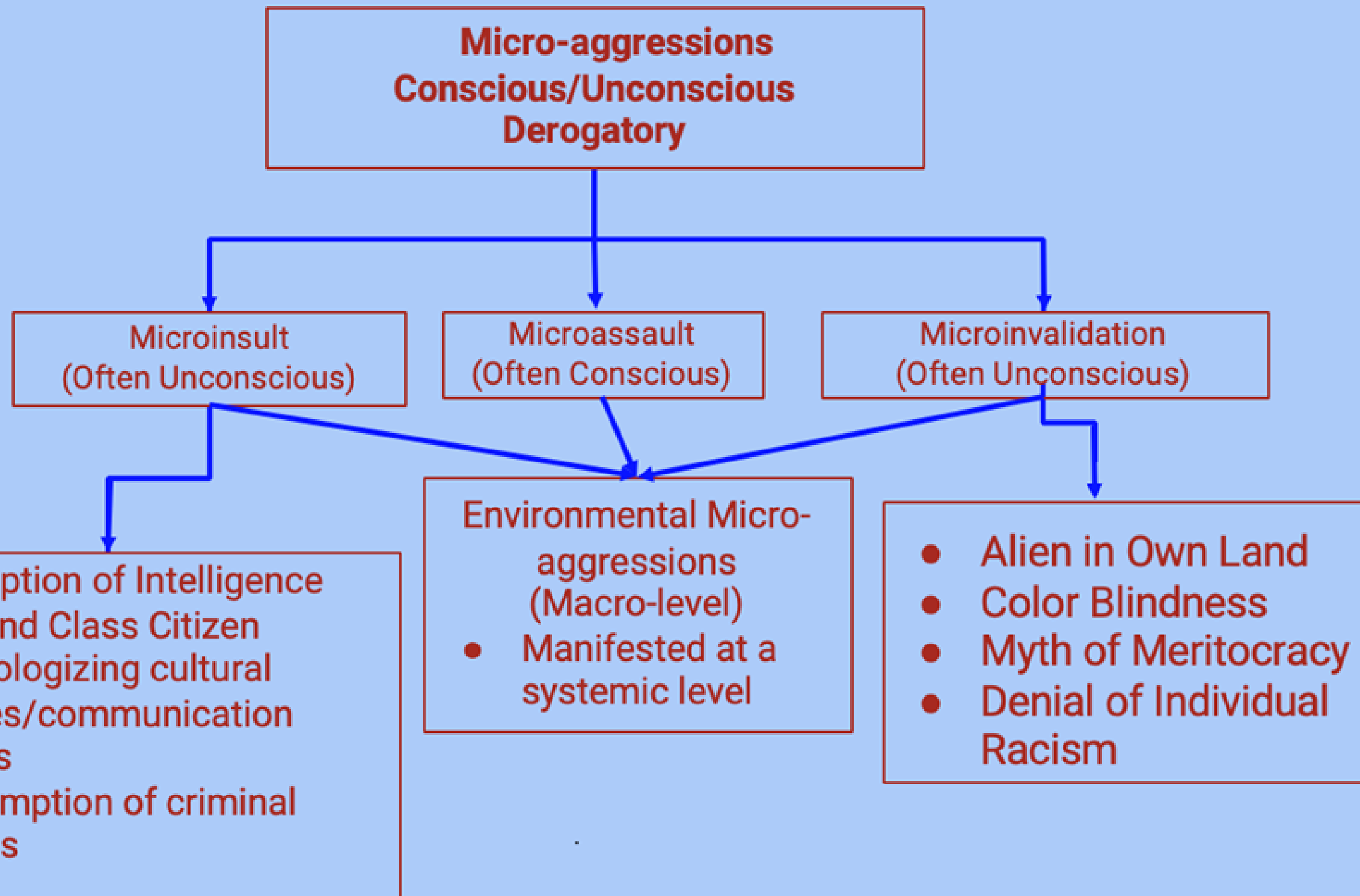
Microinvalidation Invalidation

Asking Asian-Americans where they were born, sending the message that they are foreigners in their own country.

Framework #1: Defining Micro-aggressions

Bias
Micro-
aggressions

This framework illustrates the intersecting categories of and relationships among racial microaggressions.





Impact of Microaggression

**Module 3:
Uncovering Microaggressions**



Personal Impact

A gold circle containing the text "Micro-aggressions" in white.

Although the word "micro" means "small," each instance of microaggression has a big impact on a person's employee experience, physical health, and psychological well-being.

The problem with microaggression is the impact or **psychological bind** on the affected person. Dr. Sue indicates that the person (victim) may feel insulted but doesn't exactly know why, and the person (perpetrator) who made the insult doesn't acknowledge anything happened or is unaware that the incident was offensive.

Impact in clinical setting

Micro-
aggressions

Effect on Patients

- Alienation
- Disparities
- Workforce that doesn't reflect them

Effect on Practitioners

- Increase in burnout
- Higher rates of depression and anxiety

The invisible attack

Micro-aggressions

Microaggression is often bias hidden behind coded language that creates a safe way to discriminate.





Everyday Examples

**Module 3:
Uncovering Microaggressions
Part 1**



Racial Microaggressions

Micro-aggressions

A doctor and a certified nurse assistant walk into a hospital room at the same time wearing scrubs. One is a Black woman, and the other is a White man. The patient immediately speaks to the White man as though he is the doctor. Although her name tag reads, “Lisa Smith, MD,” the patient assumes that the Black woman is the subordinate.

Hidden message:

Your race indicates that you are not qualified to be a physician.

A South Asian couple is escorted to the back of the restaurant and seated at a table next to the noisy kitchen, despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front.

Hidden message:

You are a second-class citizen who doesn't deserve first-class treatment.

A White colleague recommends that his Black colleague wear a more traditional and socially acceptable hairstyle to fit in.

Hidden message:

Your culture is not accepted.

Gender Microaggressions

Micro-
aggressions

A search committee hiring a department chair in rehabilitation science is meeting to discuss the final list of candidates, which includes two men and one woman. While reviewing the candidates, a male committee member says, “I think we should hire one of the men. Men take risks.”

Hidden message:

Women should occupy support roles and not decision-making roles.
Women are less capable than men.

An assertive female practitioner is labeled as “bossy” and “aggressive” by her staff, while her male counterpart is described as “a strong and effective leader.”

Hidden message:

Women should be passive and meek and allow men to be the decision makers.



Sexual Orientation Microaggressions

Micro-
aggressions

When asked about a concert, a young person uses the term "gay" to indicate that she didn't like it or didn't have fun.

Hidden message:

Being gay is associated as negative and undesirable.

Two men in the LGBTQIA community kiss and hug in public and are told not to flaunt their sexuality.

Hidden message:

Displays of affection from same-sex couples are abnormal and distasteful. Keep it behind closed doors and to yourselves.



Disability Microaggressions

Micro-
aggressions

A man with visual impairment experiences people raising their voices when speaking to him, even though he can hear.

Hidden message:

A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning.





Dealing with offensive microaggressions

**Module 3:
Uncovering Microaggressions
Part 1**



Visibility

Micro-aggressions

“
Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory.
”

Dr. Sue recommends making the invisible visible.

Reflection

Micro-
aggressions

Microaggressions reinforce privilege and undermine an inclusive culture.

Realizing that you may be expressing microaggressions is a significant task because it directly conflicts the self-image of being proper, good, and morally decent and forces us to **face** that at an **unconscious level**, we all have biased thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that are harmful to marginalized groups.



First steps: What you can do

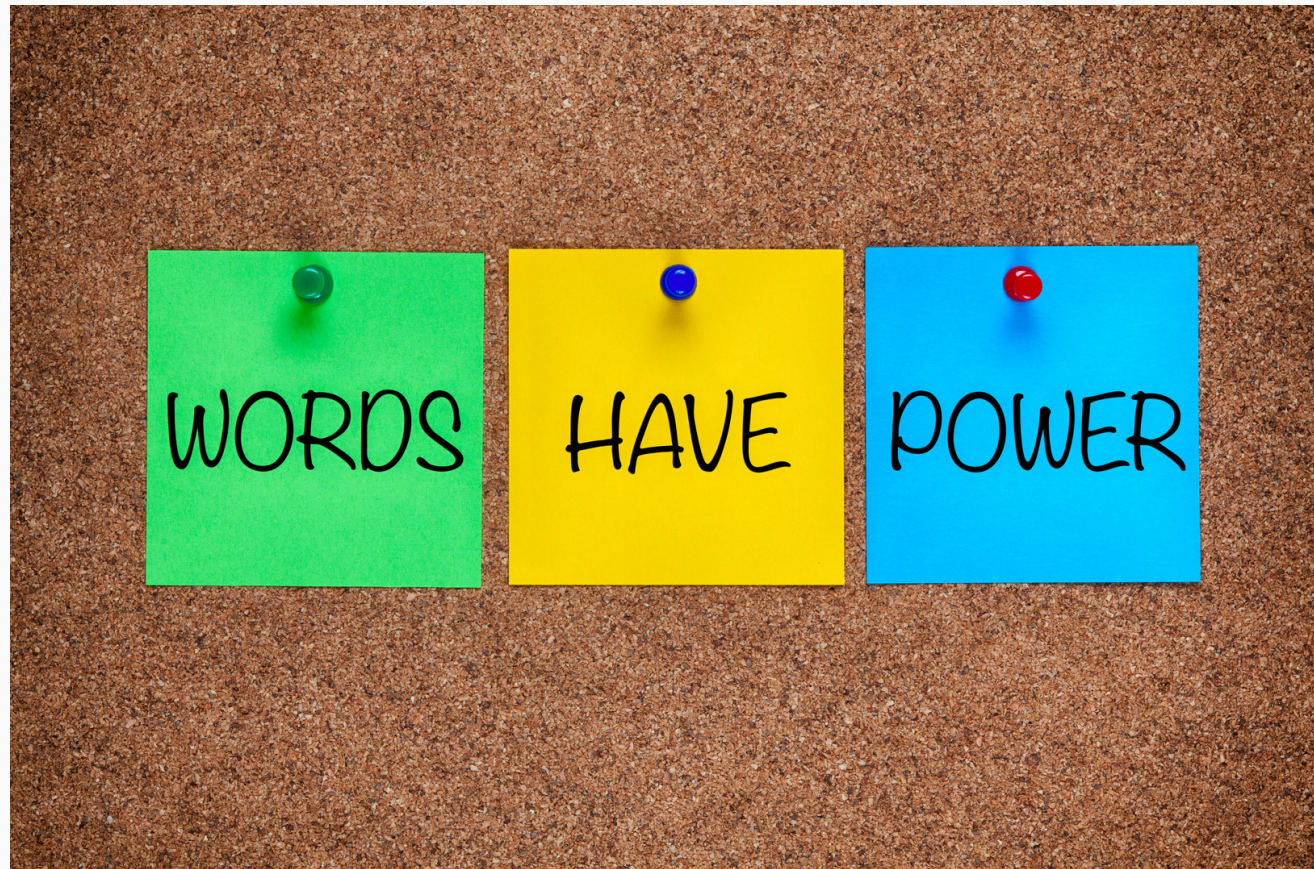
Micro-
aggressions

Recognizing microaggressions is a critical first step in learning how to deal with them immediately.

- Listen intently to the person on the receiving end.
- Show empathy to their feelings and how the microaggression impacts them.
- Make a conscious effort to not be defensive or dismiss the person's feelings.
- Take responsibility for any underlying bias held toward certain groups.
- Take actionable steps to become more educated.
- Commit to recognizing and changing microaggression behaviors.

First steps: What you can do

Micro-
aggressions



- Recognize that language evolves over time and words that were once generally used may now be considered offensive.
- Tips:
 - Use people-first language.
 - Remove gender from roles.
 - Limit profanity.
 - Avoid using slurs in conversation.

Speaking up: The 4 D's

Micro-aggressions

1 Discern

Determine how much of an investment you want to make in addressing the microaggression. When addressing microaggressions, consider the following:

- **The importance of the issue and the relationship.** If the relationship is important to you, don't avoid the topic; instead, approach the conversation in a way that honors both parties and assert yourself in a way that acknowledges and clearly expresses your concerns.
- **Your feelings.** The hidden messages of microaggression can make you doubt yourself. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotion that rises—anger, sadness, frustration, or confusion.
- **Perception.** Deciding to speak up or remain silent can have consequences, and you must determine which matters most in each situation.

2 Disarm

Be prepared to disarm the person who delivered the microaggression, because they do not want to be perceived or revealed as racist or homophobic.

Feel comfortable in explaining that the conversation may become uncomfortable while you uncover the root of the issue.

3 Deny

Challenge the perpetrator to clarify their statement or action by asking, "What did you mean by that comment?"

This provides the opportunity for the perpetrator to explain what they meant and for you to further understand the intent.

4 Decide

You have the power to control what a microaggression will mean in your life.

Marginalized groups frequently encounter and navigate bias on a larger scale.

Protecting your peace from a microaggression can be a conscious and powerful act of resistance.



Visit aota.org for Part 2: Facing Difficult Conversations



AOTA DEI Toolkit

For more information, please see the DEI Toolkit for resources and assessment tools.

Visit: <https://www.aota.org/About-Occupational-Therapy/diversity.aspx>



References

Self
Reflection

- Cheng S-J. A. (2014). A review of “That's So Gay! Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community.” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 10, 422–424.
- Coates, R. D., & Morrison, J. (2011). *Covert racism: Theories, institutions, and experiences*. BRILL.
- DeAngelis, T. (2018). Subtle race microaggressions can be the most toxic. In G. Weiner (Ed.), *Microaggressions, safe spaces, and trigger warnings (current controversies)* (1st ed., pp. 100). Greenhaven Publishing.
- King, E., & Jones, K. (2016, July 13). Why subtle bias is so often worse than blatant discrimination. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-subtle-bias-is-so-often-worse-than-blatant-discrimination>
- Lovelace, D. (2018, June 14). Ground rules for culturally sensitive conversations— Communicating about culturally sensitive Issues. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/learning/communicating-about-culturally-sensitive-issues/ground-rules-for-culturally-sensitive-conversations?autoplay=true&trk=learning-course_toItem&upsellOrderOrigin=default_guest_learning
- Lowe, T. H. (2021, February 18). Defining microaggression—Dealing with microaggression as an employee. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/learning/dealing-with-microaggression-as-an-employee/defining-microaggression?autoplay=true&trk=learning-course_toItem&upsellOrderOrigin=default_guest_learning
- Obear, K. (2020). Recognizing and interrupting microaggressions [Slides]. [Http://Drkathyobear.Com/](http://Drkathyobear.Com/). <https://drkathyobear.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Microaggressions-Handout-Formatted.pdf>
- Sandoval, R. S., Afolabi, T., Said, J., Dunleavy, S., Chatterjee, A., & ÖLveczky, D. (2020). Building a tool kit for medical and dental students: Addressing microaggressions and discrimination on the wards. *MedEdPORTAL*, 16(1). https://doi.org/10.15766/mep_2374-8265.10893
- Smith, A. (2020, June 12). What to know about microaggressions. *Medical News Today*. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/microaggressions#types>
- Sue, D. W. (2010, November 17). Microaggressions: More than just race. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>
- Sue D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino G. C., Bucceri J. M., Holder A. M., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007, May-June). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>. PMID: 17516773.
- University of New Hampshire. (n.d.). Making the invisible visible: Gender microaggressions. UNH Advance Institutional Transformation. https://www.unh.edu/sites/default/files/departments/office_of_the_provost/Academic_Admin/gendermicroaggressions.pdf
- Washington, E., Hall Birch, A., & Morgan Roberts, L. (2020, July 3). When and how to respond to microaggressions. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/07/when-and-how-to-respond-to-microaggressions>

