

“Microaggression” is not micro

Language matters. Sometimes, it matters greatly.

In Ibram X. Kendi’s[1] brilliant, important book, *How To Be An Anti-racist*, he criticizes the word “microaggression,” the term coined by Chester Pierce[2] to refer to “manifestations of prejudice and hatred that are brief and/or subtle but great in the power or magnitude of their consequences”.[3]

The purpose of this essay is to alert readers to our use of that term in the 2014 APORIA report of our study of racism and sexism on historically predominantly white university campuses in the United States [3] and to comment on it. What gave rise to our Voices of Diversity research was the absurd claim that when Black or Latinx students’ graduation rates are lower than those of other groups, that is because the former are less intelligent or their families don’t care about education. Our one-on-one interviews with students from racialized groups revealed what happens right on campus that can interfere with attempts to get an education.

By the time we conducted the research, laws about hate speech and somewhat raised awareness had to an extent reduced the most blatant manifestations of sexism and racism, so the subtler manifestations were far more common. Pierce’s work at the time was important: He pointed out that racist acts are not limited to blatant, major ones like physical violence and that even less obvious acts are clearly racist and have serious consequences for their targets. His use of “microaggression” became widely used to highlight these subtler forms.

A major reason the Findings section in our initial article is lengthy is that the interviewees’ descriptions of how these subtler acts affected them were so powerful. I wish I had thought to point out in that article that the term “microaggression” could mistakenly imply that the effects of such acts are minor. In fact, the very nature of these acts often makes it easier for the perpetrators to claim that their targets are overly sensitive or paranoid, which can cause huge torment. This example from our study illustrates the point:

An African American man said: “I have to stop and think sometimes, ‘Are they being racist? Or, is that just how they act? Or, are they just not being friendly because they’re having a bad day?’ So I try not to let it get into my head and make me angry and things like that. I just try to think it through, like maybe there are other reasons why they’re not friendly. So I try not to think about all the negative and try to think about the positive. I do speak and try to get them to speak, but if they don’t want to, I just try to go on with my day. It makes me feel like I am not wanted.”

[1]Kendi, Ibram X. (2019). *How To Be an Anti-racist*. New York: One World.

[2]Pierce, C. Offensive mechanisms. In F. Barbour (Ed.), *The Black seventies*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970; 265-282.

[3]Caplan, Paula J., & Ford, Jordan C. (2014). The Voices of Diversity: What students of diverse races/ethnicities and both sexes tell us about their college experiences and their perceptions about their institutions’ progress toward diversity. *APORIA: The Nursing Journal* 6(3), 30-69.

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