

An NSF funded program to improve the climate for UNH faculty through fair and equitable policies, practices and leadership development.

Making the Invisible Visible: Gender Microaggressions

Imagine these scenarios:

You are a member of a faculty search committee hiring an assistant professor in biology. The committee is just starting a face-to-face interview with a candidate named Maria Vasquez. She has dark hair, dark eyes, and a tan complexion. Most committee members assume Dr. Vasquez is Latina. One of your colleagues asks an ice-breaking question, "Where are you from?" Dr. Vasquez responds, "Minneapolis." Your colleague follows-up with, "No, I mean, where do you come from originally?" Dr. Vasquez frowns. "Minneapolis," she repeats with an edge to her voice.

A search committee hiring a department chair in environmental science is meeting to discuss the final list of candidates, which includes two men and one woman. During the discussion, a male committee member says, "I think we should hire one of the men. I won't work for a woman."

Your computer information systems department is hiring a new assistant professor. When committee members are introducing themselves during an on-campus interview with a female candidate, the candidate notices that a female

committee member frequently looks at her chest, which makes the candidate very uncomfortable. The committee member seems unaware of her behavior.

During a meeting of the faculty search committee on which you are serving, almost every time a female colleague tries to speak, she is interrupted by a male colleague. No one says anything when this happens. Finally, your female colleague stops trying to offer contributions to the discussion. You wonder what she wanted to say.

An African American man named Alex is a candidate for a tenure-track job in chemistry. During his on-campus interview, the chairperson of the search committee is giving him a tour. As they walk through the department labs, the chairperson makes a point of saying, "We treat everyone equally here. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from. We are all the same." Alex smiles politely and crosses his arms.

Why are these comments and behaviors problematic?

These are examples of "microaggressions."

Defining Microaggressions

Microaggressions:

- are verbal and nonverbal behaviors
- communicate negative, hostile, and derogatory messages to people rooted in their marginalized group membership (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.)
- occur in everyday interactions
- can be intentional or unintentional
- are often unacknowledged

Three Forms of Microaggressions:

1. **microassaults:** "old fashioned" discrimination
 - name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions
 - likely to be conscious and deliberate
2. **microinsults:** subtle snubs that communicate a covert insulting message
 - convey stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity that demean a person's identity
 - are frequently unknown to the person

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3. microinvalidations: disconfirming messages
 - exclude, negate, or dismiss the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of certain groups
 - may be most damaging form of the three microaggressions

Types of Gender Microaggressions

1. Sexual objectification
2. Second-class citizenship
3. Use of sexist language
4. Assumption of inferiority
5. Restrictive gender roles
6. Denial of the reality of sexism
7. Denial of individual sexism
8. Invisibility
9. Sexist humor/jokes
10. Environmental invalidations: macrolevel aggressions that happen on systemic and environmental level (unequal pay; glass ceiling; media images)

Microaggressions can also be based on membership in other marginalized groups based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, etc.

Detrimental Impact of Gender Microaggressions

1. Negative impact on standard of living
 - Unequal wages
 - Higher levels of poverty
2. Negative impact on physical health
 - Migraines, heart disease, autoimmune disorders
3. Negative impact on psychological health
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders

Moving Forward: How to Overcome Microaggressions

1. Individual Intervention
 - Develop an honest awareness of our own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes
 - Become an ally and activist
2. Organizational Intervention
 - Make sure policies, practices, and procedures allow for equal access and opportunity
 - Create a welcoming communication climate
 - Provide professional development opportunities
 - Make accountability central
3. Societal/Cultural Intervention
 - Critically assess cultural communication (education, mass media, institutions, etc.)
 - Create social policy and law to rectify discrimination and promote equal access
 - Promote multi-cultural education

The Challenges of Responding to Microaggressions

Dilemma #1: *The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias*

- tend to be subtle, indirect, and unintentional
- occurs when other rationales for prejudicial behavior can be offered

Dilemma #2: *Perceived Minimal Harm of Microaggressions*

- when people say things like “Just let it go,” “You are overreacting,” or “It’s not a big deal”
- the cumulative effect of microaggressions can be more problematic and detrimental than overt acts of prejudice

Dilemma #3: *The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions*

- “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”
- challenges faced by the victim:
 1. determining that a microaggression has actually occurred
 2. figuring out how to react
 - not responding may have detrimental effects
 3. responding with anger and striking back
 - will likely engender negative consequences

Where should you go at UNH to report microaggressive behavior?

Faculty should report incidents to their department chair and staff should report to their supervisors. Faculty and staff can also report discriminatory behavior to Donna Marie Sorrentino, Director of Affirmative Action and Equity, at affirmaction.equity@unh.edu.

UNH policy and processes for handling complaints resulting from discrimination are available on-line at the UNH Affirmative Action and Equity Office website at: <http://unh.edu/affirmativeaction/policies.html>

A Sampling of References

Capodilupo, C.M., Nadal, K.L., Corman, L., Hamit, S., Lyons, O.B., & Weinberg, A. (2010). In D.W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 193-216). New York: John Wiley and Sons; Nadal, K.L. (2010). *Gender microaggressions and women: Implications for mental health*. In M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Feminism and women's rights worldwide: Vol. 2. Mental and physical health* (pp. 155-175). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger; Sue, D.W. (2010a). *Microaggressions in everyday life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons; and Sue, D.W. (2010b). *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Internet Resources

1. *The Microaggressions Project: people post examples of microaggressions in their everyday lives*
<http://www.microaggressions.com/>
2. *U-Tube Video: Derald Wing Sue explaining microaggressions*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4>
3. *U-Tube video: Derald Wing Sue, invited lecture on microaggressions at the 2012 American Psychological Association Conference in Orlando FL*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW3tFpThHzl>
4. *“What kind of Asian are you?” U-Tube video parody*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJK5HbQ>