

Effects of Microaggressions, Bias and Discrimination on Student Wellbeing and Learning

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Learning Objectives

1. Define microaggressions
2. Identify microaggressions in learning environments
3. Describe the impact of microaggressions on the recipient, bystanders, and community
4. Discuss how to become an active bystander
5. Recognize instances of bias and discrimination by patients towards clinicians and students
6. Identify strategies for addressing patient bias or discrimination towards clinicians and students

Definition of Microaggressions

- Microaggressions are subtle statements and behaviors that consciously or unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to individuals or groups based on some aspect of their identity (*Nadal, 2011, Sue, 2010*).

Type	Definition
Micro-assaults	Intentionally and explicitly derogatory verbal or non-verbal attacks.
Micro-insults	Rude and insensitive subtle put-downs of someone's heritage or identity.
Micro-invalidations	Remarks that diminish, dismiss or negate the realities and histories of groups of people.

Examples of Microaggressions

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Alien in own land	“Where are you from?” “You speak good English.”
Ascription of intelligence	“Did you really get an A on that exam”?
Color blindness	“When I look at you, I don’t see color.” “America is a melting pot.”
Criminality	Person of color (POC) being followed in a store White person clutching bag near POC
Denial of individual racism	“I have black/Asian/Hispanic friends.”
Myth of Meritocracy	“Everyone can succeed if they just work hard”
Myth of Diversity	We had to lower our standards to admit students of color You were only admitted/hired as a diversity student/employee
Pathologizing culture	“You shouldn’t be so loud/quiet, etc.” Women being emotional or aggressive vs assertive
2nd class citizen	Assumption one is janitor, taxi driver, secretary etc.
Environment	No statues/pictures of POC in halls



Microaggressions in Learning Environments

- **Said to a Latino student:** “You are a credit to your race.”
- **Said to a Black student:** “You were admitted because you are Black. It is really hard for White men to get admitted these days.”
- **Said to a Native American Student:** “Why don’t you tell your classmates about the health issues of Native Americans.”
- **Said to a Male Student:** “I didn’t know men could be so caring.”
- **Said about a student with they/them pronouns on their badge** “Young people these days can’t even decide if they are a boy or girl”.

Microaggressions Are:

Not always consciously done.

Powerful because they are subtle-sometimes invisible, especially to those who do not share the identity.



Instances that cause the recipient to experience strong emotions, try to understand what was meant, and then decide how to respond.

Health Impact of Microaggressions

- Cause mental health effects (depression and anxiety).
 - *Compton and Shim, 2015; O'Keefe, et al., 2015; Sue, 2010 Torres, L., & Taknint, 2015; Torres-Harding, Torres & Yeo, 2020*
- Create physical health problems (Allostatic Load).
 - *Geronimus, 2006, 2009; Compton and Shim, 2015, RWJF, 2017; Seeman et al. 1997.*
- Lack of trust in the healthcare system, means that people are less likely to seek healthcare.



Social and Cognitive Impact of Microaggressions



- Perpetuate stereotypes and passively allow society to devalue groups
- Cause energy to be diverted away from learning and/or productivity (cognitive load)

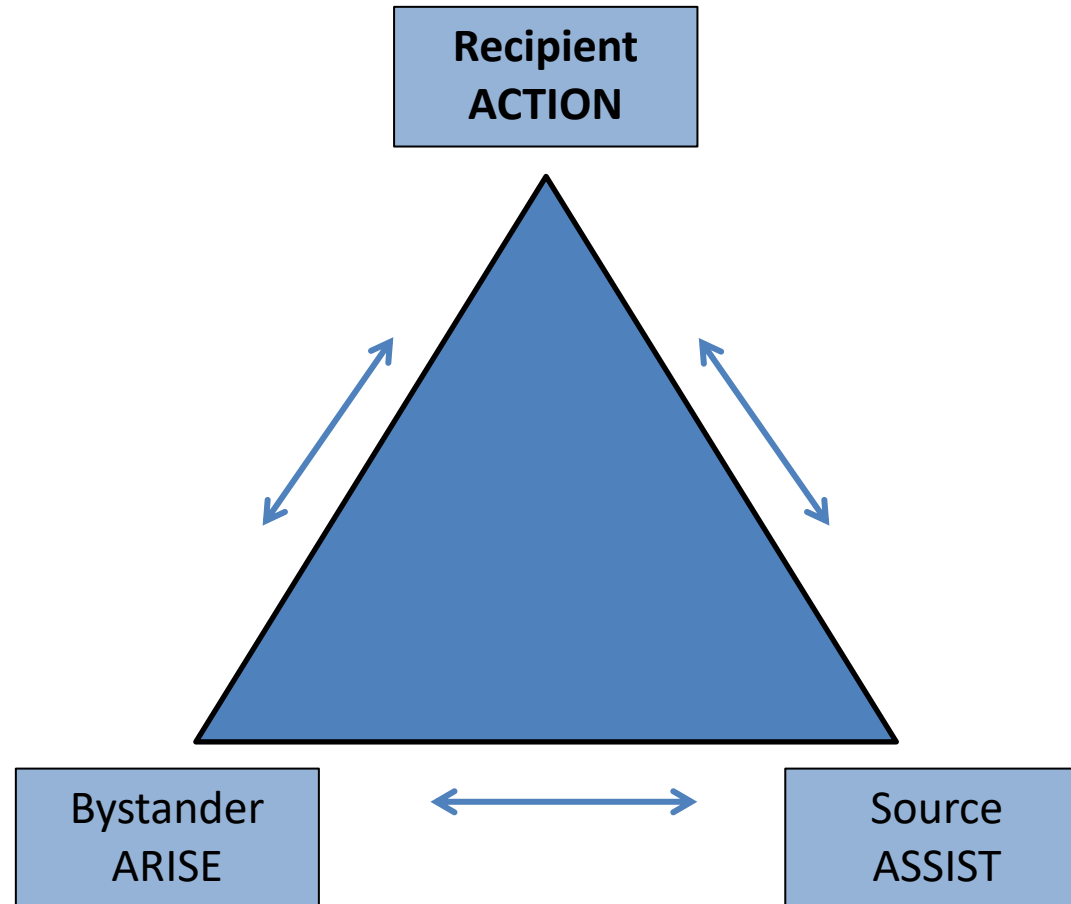
Example Scenario: No, Really?

An African-American male pharmacy student, Rick, described an interaction with peers after an exam.

“Classmates were asking, okay, what did you get on the exam? People responded, ‘I got an A, a B,’ or ‘I have retake it’—things like that. And I didn’t even want to mention it, but I was specifically asked what I had gotten, so I said, ‘I got a hundred percent on this exam.’ And people did not believe it for some reason. Even though other people had a similar grade, everyone was kind of surprised that I got such a high score and didn’t ‘I have to retake it’? I can’t help but wonder if it is because I am Black.”



Roles in Microaggressions Scenarios



Bystander- ARISE Approach

- **A**wareness of microaggression
- **R**espond with empathy
- **I**nquiry of facts
- **S**tatements that start with “I”
- **E**ducate and **E**ngage

Bystander Notes

Assess the Situation: Every situation is different. Consider the safety of all individuals. Is this the time and place? What would be the best strategy for interrupting the interaction? How do I preserve the dignity of the individuals and the relationships?

- Consider “oops” and “ouch”

Rebuild: During a microaggression there are threats to the reputations of all involved. The recipient may be seen as oversensitive, the source as racist, and the bystander(s) as a coward. Rebuilding gives all involved the opportunity to restore their reputations and repair.

Check in with the recipient

Validate their experience and their feelings

- “That was not ok”
- “That is not how we do things here”
- “I can see how you would be really upset”
- ”I’m really sorry that happened to you”

Ask what, if anything, they want you to do

- Just listen versus take action
- “How can I support you?”
- ”If this happens again, how would you like me to respond?”

Bystanders-Responses ARISE

Awareness. A bystander could have raised awareness of the situation by saying, “Your surprise about Rick’s score may suggest a biased assumption.”

Respond with empathy and avoidance of judgment. While it may be tempting to respond with the negative emotions that have been engendered by the interaction, approaching with empathy is critical because the goal is to rebuild community. Avoiding judgment means allowing others the grace to make mistakes, and to learn from their mistakes.

Inquiry. Approach the situation with curiosity and make inquiries. For example, “Can you explain your comment to me?” or “What did you mean by that?”

Statements that start with I. A bystander also can use “I” statements to talk about how the comment made them feel. For example: “I noticed that Rick seemed offended when you made that comment about his score and, honestly, I was uneasy as well.”

Educate and engage. “I know you didn’t intend to stereotype anyone, but as your friend, I want to let you know that what you said could be interpreted that way.”



Case: They Haven't Kicked You Boys Out Yet?

Consider the story of an incident as retold by two different students at two different interviews, unbeknownst to the other student. Rashid and Daevion are two first year Pharmacy students. They are the only two Black men in their cohort. They each described an interaction with a White male professor.

“So, me and a fellow classmate, who is also Black, were coming in early to get some last minute studying in before finals. And we ran into a professor that we had in Anatomy and Physiology. And I held the door for him, said, ‘Hi, how’s it going’ and then he’s like, ‘Oh, hi, how are you boys doing? They haven’t kicked you out yet?’ I didn’t know... was it unintentional or did it have deeper meaning? And me and my friend looked at each other and were in shock a little bit and didn’t know how to address it.

But we just went on and studied. But it was interesting because microaggressions don’t usually get to me but like I think with this one I was like, ‘Man!’, like, for 10 minutes instead of studying I was like, Ugh! Did he really just say that?” *Daevion*

“There was a time when I saw a previous professor who I consider a friend and I think he considers me a friend as well. And me and a classmate, he’s also African-American, were walking in the building. And he was like, ‘Oh, they haven’t kicked you all out yet?’ We’re friends, like, sarcasm whatever... But to somebody who isn’t like me, they could have easily been hurt by that, struck by that, triggered by that. And a bit of me was too. I was kinda like, ‘what?’” *Rashid*

Ackerman-Barger K, Jacobs NN, Orozco R, London M. Addressing Microaggressions in Academic Health: A Workshop for Inclusive Excellence. *MedEdPORTAL*. 2021;17:11103. https://doi.org/10.15766/mep_2374-8265.11103



Responding as a Bystander

- Pros and cons of responding in the moment versus later
- *"I wanted to follow up with you about an interaction I saw yesterday. When Rashid and Daevion were holding the door open for you, you expressed surprise that they hadn't been kicked out yet and you called them boys. I noticed their faces drop. I am not sure if you were joking, but if you were, I think it may not have come out like you thought. I wanted to let you know because we have worked together for a while and that statement does not align with who I know you to be."*
 - Can go on to educate and engage

Deep dive into a specific microaggression:
patient bias and discrimination towards clinicians
and students

The Ethical Dilemma of the Biased Patient

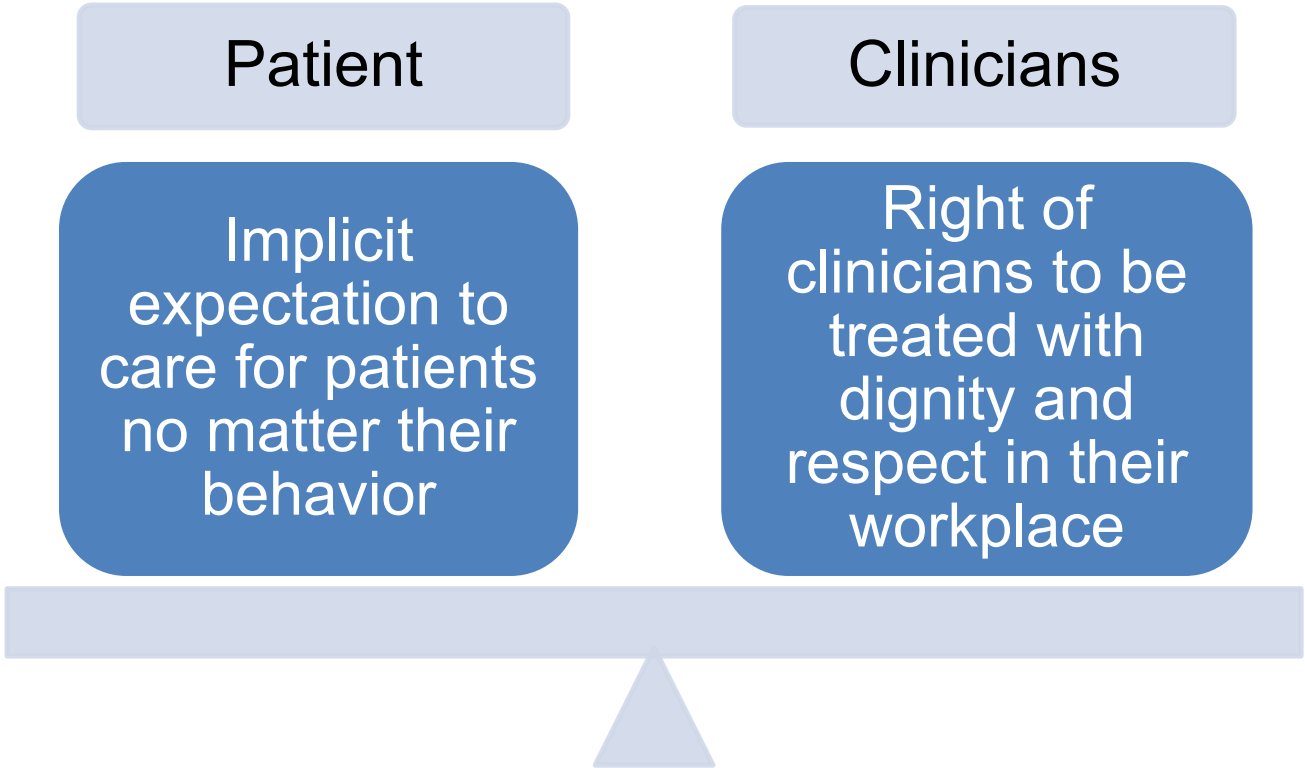


“Why do you wear that thing on your head anyways?”

– A patient to Dr. Altaf Saadi, while she was a neurology resident in the MGH-Brigham program

<https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2016/01/08/hospital-bigotry-opinion>

The Ethical Dilemma of the Biased Patient



Patient Bias in the Clinical Setting

- Incidents of patient bias can include:
 - Explicit rejection of care
 - Prejudiced epithets
 - Inappropriate compliments
 - Flirtatious comments
 - Belittling jokes reflecting ethnic stereotypes
- **What constitutes bias and discrimination is defined by the individual experiencing the event**

Impact on Minority Students

Why are students vulnerable?

- Lack of knowledge on handling such situations
- Medical hierarchy
- Little decision-making authority
- Concern for supervisors perceiving them as weak or flawed
- Academic repercussions

How can it affect students?

- Decreased ability to focus on learning and training
- Feeling devalued and invisible
- Avoiding rotations and clinical sites where encounters with biased patients are more common
- “This is part of the job”

As faculty, how can you support students experiencing incidents of patient bias and discrimination?

Case

- **You are precepting Claire, a female Black pharmacy student. She is seeing a White patient, Mr. Smith. As you observe, Mr. Smith calls Claire “colored girl” three times in front of you. Claire does not say anything to Mr. Smith and proceeds with her interview, though she does seem uncomfortable.**
- As Claire’s preceptor, how would you handle this situation? What, if anything, would you say to the student? To the patient?

Case Debrief

- When you first meet your student, set expectations and discuss protocols for responding to biased patients. Remember to also discuss when a student might wish to handle a situation independently.
- If you think a patient's comment is making a student feel disrespected or devalued, consider speaking up. It is not the medical student's responsibility to advocate for themselves!
- After the incident, debrief with the student. Give them an opportunity to talk about what happened without minimizing their experience. Guide them in crafting an appropriate response if a similar situation happens in the future.

Case Example Language

- **Setting expectations:** “There are times when a patient may say something that is disrespectful or derogatory to you. Though rare, they do occur. You can absolutely step away from any experience that makes you uncomfortable. I am here to be your advocate. Let’s talk about how you might respond in these situations if they occur and what resources are available to you.”
- **Intervening:** “I don’t think you meant to be hurtful, but your comments are making us feel uncomfortable. We promise to treat you with respect, and we expect the same from you.”
- **Debriefing:** “I’m sorry, that should never have happened. How are you feeling?”

Addressing Patient Bias at the Institutional Level

For patients

- Guidelines for patient conduct

For clinicians

- Education on rights and responsibilities
- Training on how to respond when facing or witnessing patient bias

For organizations

- Clear policies to protect clinicians
- Reporting mechanisms
- Systems to adjudicate blame

Culture change to normalize reporting & support clinicians

Systematic research on patient bias against clinicians

Thank you

- Session Resources
- [The Microaggressions Triangle Model: A Humanistic Approach to Navigating Microaggressions in Health Professions Schools](#) (PDF)
- [Addressing Microaggressions in Academic Health: A Workshop for Inclusive Excellence](#) (PDF)
- [Addressing Patient Bias and Discrimination Against Clinicians of Diverse Backgrounds](#) (PDF)