

# Addressing Microaggressions Using the Triangle Model

Piri Ackerman-Barger, PhD,  
RN, CNE, FAAN

Associate Dean for Health  
Equity, Diversity and Inclusion



# Goals of the Microaggressions Triangle Model



Humanistic  
Approach

Prevention of  
microaggressions

Promote inclusion  
excellence

Repair and  
reestablish  
relationships

Decide whether the  
interaction is a  
teachable moment  
or opportunity to  
promote inclusion

Restore  
reputations

# What the Model Is not



An algorithm or roadmap,  
but a framework for making  
decisions about how to  
handle a microaggression

Appropriate for every  
situation, especially overt  
racism or discrimination.

About taking sides or deciding  
who is right or wrong, but to  
consider how an interaction  
could be moved forward to re-  
establish and restore  
relationships.

# Defining Microaggressions



**Chester Pierce**  
1927-2016  
MD, Psychiatry  
Harvard University

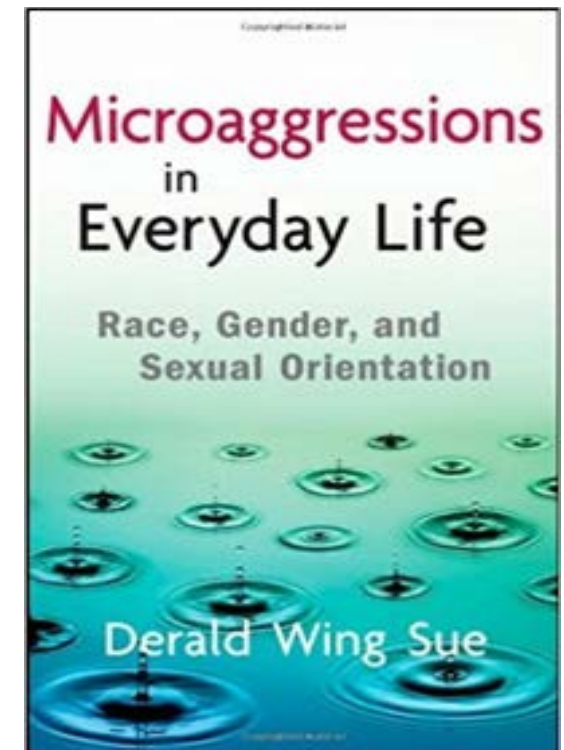
*Pierce C (1970). "Offensive mechanisms". In Barbour F (ed.). In the Black Seventies. Boston, MA: Porter Sargent. p. 265–282.*

# Definition of Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle statements and behaviors that 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.

(Sue and Colleagues, 2007)



# Microaggressions

Examples of Microaggressions, Sue, et al. 2007	
Alien in own land	<p>“Where are you from?”</p> <p>“You speak good English.”</p>
Ascription of intelligence	<p>“You are a credit to your race.”; “Did you really get an A on that exam”?</p>
Color blindness	<p>“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</p> <p>“America is a melting pot.”</p>
Criminality	<p>Person of color (POC) being followed in a store</p> <p>White person clutching bag near POC</p>
Denial of individual racism	<p>“I have black/Asian/Hispanic friends.”</p>
*Myth of meritocracy	<p>“Everyone can succeed if they work hard”</p> <p>“Most qualified person should get in, get position”</p>
*Myth of Diversity	<p>We had to lower our standards to admit students of color</p> <p>You were only admitted/hired as a diversity student/employee</p>

# Healthcare Microaggressions

- **Said to a nurse:** “You are so smart, why didn’t you become a doctor?”
- **Said to a Latino nursing student:** “You are a credit to your race.”
- **Said to a Black medical student:** “You were admitted because you are Black. It is really hard for White men to get admitted these days .”
- **Said to a Male Nurse:** “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 for those who do not share the targeted identity
- ❖ Instances that cause the recipient to experience strong emotions while trying understand what was meant and how to respond to the source of the microaggression.





# Health Impact of Microaggression

## Cause mental health effects

(Compton and Shim, 2015; O'Keefe, et al., 2015; Torres, L., & Taknint, 2015; Torres-Harding, Torres & Yeo, 2020)

## Create physical health problems

(Compton and Shim, 2015; Geronimus, 2009; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017, Seeman, et al. 1997)

## Lack of Trust in the Healthcare System



# 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)



# Microaggressions v. Macroaggressions

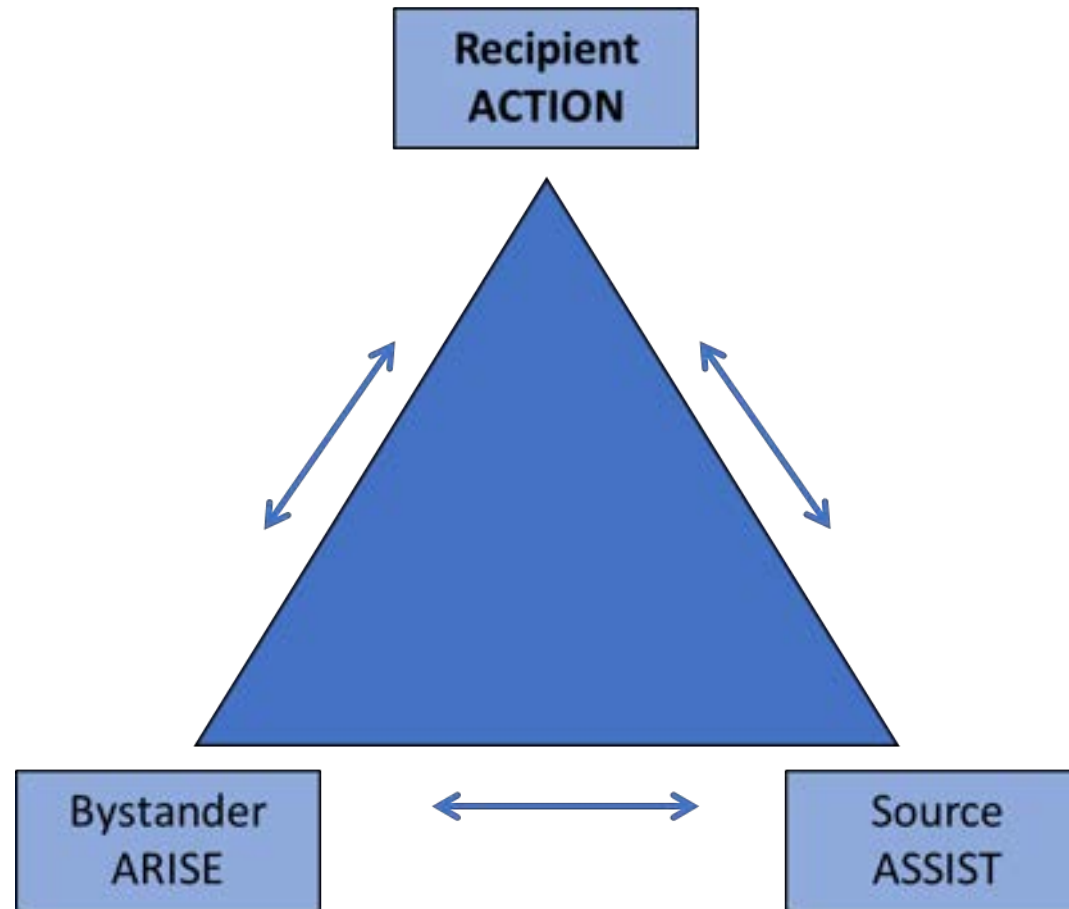


“Micro” aggression- does not refer to impact. There can be enormous emotional impact from a microaggression. The term micro refers to the common daily experience of it.



“Macro” aggression as described by Dr. Chester Pierce refers to physical violence like lynching (Pierce, 1970). Macroaggression as described by the emerging microaggressions theory refers to institutionalized microaggressions. (Sue, et al. 2019)

# The Triangle Model



# Example Scenario: No, Really?

*An African-American male nursing 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.”



# Recipient- ACTION Approach

- **A**sk clarifying questions
- **C**ome from curiosity, not judgment
- **T**ell what you observed in a factual manner
- **I**mpact exploration
- **O**wn your own thoughts and feelings
- **N**ext steps.



# When you are the Recipient: Notes

- ❖ It is important to understand that, when you are being mistreated, especially in your role as a student or resident, you are in a nearly impossible situation and many factors must be considered.
- ❖ Be careful to not respond in a way that makes the situation worse, or even makes you seem like the aggressor.
- ❖ Consider whether you are safe both physically and in terms of your status.
- ❖ Addressing the issue at a later time does not equate to letting it go. Seek the wise council of a trusted mentor or friend that can help you make an informed plan about how to respond.
- ❖ Addressing it in the moment is also an option, but only if your motivation is to uphold the principles of community and to take advantage of a teachable moment. If your motivation is emotion-based, there is a possibility that the situation will escalate.
- ❖ Reporting the incident gives the institution the opportunity to create a more supportive environment.

# Recipient-Responses ACTION

**Ask a clarifying question.** For example: “You seem surprised that I received a high grade. Are you surprised?”

**Come from curiosity, not judgment.** For example: “I want to better understand your surprise, can you explain it to me?”

**Tell what you observed in a factual manner.** For example: “I noticed that when you asked some of the other students about their grade you did not express the same level of surprise.”

**Impact exploration.** Discuss the impact of the statement. For example: “Ouch. Your surprise makes me feel like people doubt my ability and intellect.”

**Own your thoughts and feelings** about the subject. For example: “It’s difficult being the only Black student in our cohort. People often think I am here only to fulfill a diversity goal. That’s hard because I have always done well in school.” (If the source has been able to hear what you have shared, consider the following, which may help rebuild the relationship.)

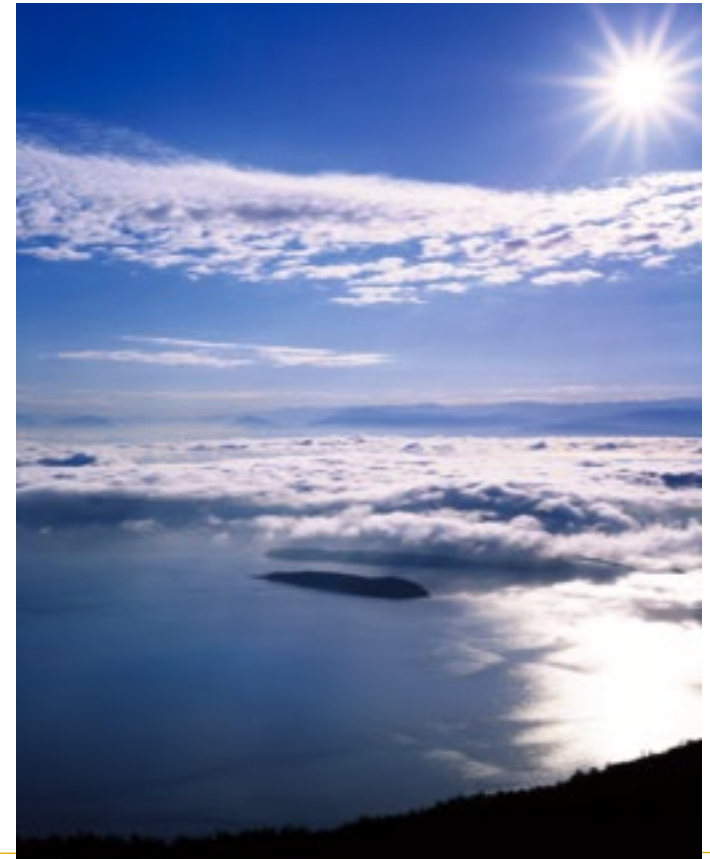
**Next steps.** For example: “Hey, let’s go to class now





# Source-ASSIST APPROACH

- **A**cknowledge your bias
- **S**eek feedback and information
- **S**ay you are sorry
- **I**mpact not Intent
- **S**ay Thank You



# When You Are The Source-Notes

**Avoid becoming defensive:** Whether your intention was to hurt another person or not, and regardless of whether you and the recipient are seeing the situation differently this is a great opportunity for you to learn about someone else's experience. Be present and listen.

**Confirmation Bias** is a tendency to gather information or respond to a circumstance in a way that confirms an already established belief or idea.

**Commitment confirmation** supports confirmation bias. It is when our minds become attached to particular points of view, even when they are wrong, and can lead to a form of confidence bias or self-motivated reasoning. This is an over attachment to being right rather than a genuine seeking of the truth.

# Source-Responses ASSIST

**Acknowledge your Bias.** A way to avoid becoming the source of microaggressions is by familiarizing ourselves with and mitigating our unconscious bias.

**Seek feedback.** For example, “I noticed when we were talking about exam grades, you became quiet. How was that interaction for you?”

**Say you are sorry.** Apologies can be difficult, because we often think of them as an admission of wrongdoing. An apology should be about recognizing someone else’s pain.

**Impact, not intent.** Whether your intention was to hurt another person or not, this is a great opportunity for you to learn about someone else’s experience. you could say: “Although it was not my intention to harm you, I see now how my questioning your score affected you and I am sorry.”

**Say thank you.** For example, “Thank you for the feedback. I appreciate you taking the time to help me grow as a person.”



# 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?
- **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.

# Bystanders-Responses ARISE

**Awareness.** A bystander could have raised awareness of the situation by saying, “Your surprise about Rick’s score suggests 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 so was I.”

**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.”

