

# Cultivating Awareness of Racial Microaggressions

Jaymie Campbell, M.A., M.Ed. 23 January 2018

Business leaders worldwide want to ensure their workplaces are inclusive of employees from diverse backgrounds. Part of establishing an inclusive and affirming environment is developing a keen sense of the racial dynamics among program staff and leadership. It can be difficult to take steps towards racial equity in the workplace if it is unknown or unclear how or why there is racial inequity. The first step many leaders take is attending some type of training about race and racism after which they generally feel overwhelmed or unsure how to move forward in their efforts to achieve racial equity. There is a lot of work to do to establish racial equity and many different entry points for a leader to take. Instead of approaching racial equity from a macro level, a micro level might not only be more tangible for an organization, but also more inspiring.

Critical race scholars across the country are arguing that one of the main barriers to achieving racial equity in the U.S. is "colorblind racism." Colorblind racism refers to the lack of awareness into how race influences institutional and interpersonal interactions, and an unwillingness to explore race as a powerful element in daily life. Other barriers to achieving racial equity are disagreements

about the definition of race, the definition of racism, and how to establish common language when there is a “clash of racial realities” (Sue, 2010). Race is one of the most charged topics in U.S. culture, and a training with racism in its title makes almost every learner fearing for the worst possible outcome.

People are less familiar with the term microaggression. Microaggressions are defined as social exchanges in which someone indirectly communicates a negative, derogatory, often stereotypical cultural belief that belittles, dehumanizes, and alienates a member from a marginalized group. Examples of marginalized groups in U.S. culture are people of color, cisgender women, transgender people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) people. As such, there are racial, gender, transgender, and LGBQ microaggressions. In other words, social exchanges in which negative, derogatory, and stereotypical messages about people from these marginalized groups happen with quite some frequency. For example, when a person of color is told they “talk white” or when a transgender woman is told that she is “not a real woman.” These expressions of cultural beliefs cause harmful psychological and physiological effects (Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014; Nadal, 2011; Sue, 2010). Increasing awareness of how we perpetuate these messages is the first step to decreasing their frequency and establishing a more cohesive work environment. This is why I developed a training called Cultivating Awareness

of Racial Microaggressions specifically designed to address racial dynamics in groups. This training has received widespread acclaim and is an effective entry point to the overarching task of establishing racial equity.

*Cultivating Awareness of Racial Microaggressions* begins with exploring the cultural backgrounds of everyone present in the room. Next, the facilitator invites learners to think about U.S. racial history in terms of what we consciously believe and unconsciously communicate. One of the strengths of the microaggressions framework is that it is a conversation for every person instead of a conversation only for white people or only for people of color. Together, everyone examines their racial realities and analyzes the impact of racial microaggressions on people of color. Finally, we end with a model for addressing racial microaggressions and identify barriers to success as well as solutions to those barriers.

In response to being asked what was most helpful in the training, some participants indicated on post-training evaluations:

*I loved how interactive it was. Even after four hours, I was never bored because we were ALWAYS being engaged. I participated much more than I thought I would which I found telling.*

*The chance to practice responding and the enhanced understanding that it needs to be done fairly soon if not*

*immediately.*

*The reparative response model because it's a model that is grounded in healing, accountability, and reducing microaggressions.*

In response to being asked what was most challenging, some participants indicated on post-training evaluations:

*The hands-on activities -- appropriately uncomfortable. Made the training tangible.*

*Thinking about the microaggressions I frequently face -- it made me angry and sad.*

*Thinking about experiences in the workplace so much that sometimes I missed content. Also, getting to a good place with words.*

90 percent of all training participants over the past year indicated that they would recommend the training on racial microaggressions. Trainings that specifically address microaggressions provide accessible and measurable behaviors to begin shifting while also working towards macro level change. Macro level change takes much longer than working on shifting individual perspective and behavior. To find out more about a microaggressions training, contact Jaymie Campbell at [Jaymie.Campbell@AccessMatters.org](mailto:Jaymie.Campbell@AccessMatters.org).

## **Works Cited**

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## **Author Bio**

**Jaymie Campbell** has been working in HIV/AIDS services and sexuality education for 10 years. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts in Feminist Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz, he began his non-profit career working with marginalized populations in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. He achieved a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, emphasis in Community Mental Health, from the California Institute of Integral Studies and focused his clinical internship on working with homeless queer and transgender youth of color. Jaymie is currently the Director of Training and Capacity Building at AccessMatters, a sexual and reproductive health organization. He has obtained a Master of Education in

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