

Microaggressions and the Native Community

A Microaggression is a “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color.”ⁱ

Three types of Microaggression:

Microassaults: Microassaults are often conscious and deliberate attacks, within limited or constrained settings, and against out-group members (e.g., serving a White patron before a person of color). Microassaults are considered covert because those who deliver them attempt to maintain some form of anonymity when using them in more intimate situations.

Microinsults: Microinsults and microinvalidations are generally unintentional, and often unconscious, which is why these two forms of discrimination are so insidious. Microinsults often include nonverbal gestures and verbal messages of explicit or implicit out-group inferiority (e.g., a White teacher ignoring a student of color).

Microinvalidations: Microinvalidations are communications that suggest that outgroup differences are not important, and these communications can often be challenges to one’s identity (e.g., “You’re being oversensitive” or “I don’t see color; I only see human beings”).ⁱⁱ

Microaggressions commonly used towards the Native Community

- What percent Native are you?
- You don't look Native.
- This is not what I expected, this doesn't even look like Native American art.
- Some of this is too heavy, too much of a downer.
- I saw some *really* beautiful Indian art when I was down in Santa Fe.
- What’s this for (referring to tobacco)? Is it to smoke the Peace Pipe? (as a joke)

Common phrases:

- “My spirit animal is so and so,”
- “on the warpath,”
- “Indian-giver,”
- “low man on the totem pole,”
- “went off the reservation,”
- “the Natives are restless,”
- “too many chiefs, not enough Indians.”

“These phrases are actually microaggressions. Some just originated out of pure appropriation, taking something meaningful to a specific people and lessening it; for example, it’s not cute or funny to say “champagne is my spirit animal.” Also, quick meetings are not “pow-wows” either — pow-wows are gatherings for celebratory and ceremonial purposes and take considerable planning”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Assumptions about Native People that are Microaggressions:

- Assuming all Native cultures are the same.

“There is no “one way” to be Native American. Every tribe and tribal citizen has a unique culture, history and tradition, and many people identify more as a citizen of a specific tribe(s) than collectively as Native American.”^{iv}

- **Assuming all Native people receive income/money from casino revenues**

“Not every tribe has a casino.... out of 567 federally recognized tribes... 329 tribes (58 percent) have no gaming operations. Indeed, the rural and unpopulated geographic locations of many Native nations discourage gaming.”^v

“If we paid out equal revenue dividends to all 5.2 million Native Americans, this would be equivalent to a per capita payout of slightly over \$6,000 per person. Even after doing so, the per capita income of Native Americans would still be about \$6,000 less than the average American’s per capita income.”^{vi}

- **Assuming all or many Native people are alcoholics**

In a 2011-2013 study conducted by the Journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependence “Researchers found that Native Americans are more likely than white counterparts to abstain from alcohol altogether, and the two groups had comparable rates of heavy and binge drinking.”^{vii}

Invisibility/Erasure

“Invisibility is the modern form of racism against Native people. We are taught that racism occurs when a group of people is seen as different, as other. We are not taught that racism occurs when a group of people is not seen at all. Yet the research shows that the lack of exposure to realistic, contemporary, and humanizing portrayals of Native people creates a deep and stubborn unconscious bias in the non-Native mind. Rooted in this unconscious bias is the idea that Native people are not real or even human.”^{viii}

Invisibility of a culture and/or the non-recognition of Native heritage is also a microaggression. Native cultures have been systematically erased for hundreds of years by European colonizers and the US government. This has taken the form of forcibly taking land, creating reservations, forcing Native youths to attend boarding schools where Native language and customs were forbidden, outlawing non-Christian religions on reservations, breaking treaties, and genocide. All these measures were and are intended to force assimilation into and claim the superiority of white European culture.

The effects of this institutionalized racism are felt today with the underrepresentation of Native Americans in media, pop culture, and education. “Contemporary Native Americans are largely invisible to the rest of the country. Native American voices are rarely heard in the news, in popular culture or in history books, and what little is reflected in those venues about Native issues and cultures is riddled with misinformation and confusion.”^{ix}

Examples of invisibility and erasure are:

- In the US education system Native histories are largely ignored or misrepresented “according to one 2015 study; only Arizona, Washington, Oklahoma, and Kansas teach about the boarding schools.”^x
- The exclusion of Edmonia Lewis from many, if not all, Art History curriculum.
- Bde Maka Ska vs. Calhoun

What you can do help:

“Use language carefully. Pay attention to the language you use in conversations among your staff and teams. Help each other see where you are inadvertently falling into assumptions or an old deficit narrative, call on each other to use better practices, and explore how you can shift your language.”^{xi}

if you overhear a microaggression between visitors: check in with the Native person and say something to the effect of “I overheard what was said, I think it was inappropriate. I wanted to check in with you.”

Calling people In instead of calling people Out

If you hear a peer, colleague, or visitor using this language or practicing erasure behavior please call them In. Calling someone in is the act of checking someone and getting them to change problematic behavior by explaining their misstep with compassion and patience.

- The communication approaches are most effective when used in combination with one another, e.g., using impact and preference statements, using inquiry and paraphrasing together, etc.
- Separate the person from the action or behavior. Instead of saying “you’re racist”, try saying “that could be perceived as a racist remark.” Being called a racist puts someone on the defensive and can be considered “fighting words.”
- Avoid starting questions with “Why”—it puts people on the defensive. Instead try “how” “what made you
- When addressing a microaggression, try to avoid using the pronoun “you” too often—it can leave people feeling defensive and blamed. Use “I” statements describing the impact on you instead or refer to the action indirectly, e.g., “when _____ was said...” or “when_____happened...”
- How you say it is as critical as what you say, e.g., tone of voice, body language, etc. The message has to be conveyed with respect for the other person, even if one is having a strong negative reaction to what’s been said. So it is helpful to think about your intention when interrupting a microaggression—e.g., do you want that person to understand the impact of his/her action, or stop his/her behavior, or make the person feel guilty, etc. Your intention and the manner in which you execute your intention make a difference.
- Sometimes humor can defuse a tense situation^{xii}

What to do if you are called In?

A lot of people are still learning, we are all at different points on the knowledge continuum. If you are called in do not get offended, try and view the interaction as a learning moment. You can do one of the following:

- Own up, learn from it and forgive yourself —we all make mistakes.
Say, “Thank you for bringing that up. I’m still learning and will be sure to think about your comment further.”
- Say, “I hear that you are upset. Having these conversations can be difficult for me as well. I’m sorry. I’ll try again.”
- Say, “You’re right. May I start over?^{xiii}”

To assist in this process refer to Mia’s *Say This, Not That* document.

ⁱ (Professor Sue, Derald) “Examples of Microaggression” Handout. ywca , Minneapolis, MN, N.D. Print.

ⁱⁱ Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Buceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *The American Psychologist*, 62, 271-286.
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ⁱⁱⁱ Davidson, Heather, “How Racism Against Native People Is Normalized, From Mascots to Costumes”, *Teen Vogue*, October 31st, 2018.
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-racism-against-native-people-is-normalized-from-mascots-to-costumes>.

^{iv} CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS A GUIDE FOR ALLIES.” *IllumiNative*, First Nations Development Institute, Echo Hawk Consulting, Apr. 2018, pg.3, illuminatives.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MessageGuide-Allies-screen-spreads.pdf.

^v Robertson, Donna, “The Myth of Indian Casino Riches”, *Indian Country Today*, April, 19th, 2017,
<https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/the-myth-of-indian-casino-riches-3H8eP-wHX0Wz0H4WnQjwJA/>

^{vi} Foxworth, Raymond, “Busting Philanthropy’s Myth about Native Americans”, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, August 27th 2018,
<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/08/27/busting-myths-native-americans/>

^{vii} Izadi, Elahe, “Your Assumptions about Native Americans and Alcohol are Wrong”, *The Washington Post*, Feb 12th, 2016,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/02/12/your-assumptions-about-native-americans-and-alcohol-are-wrong/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c73f8f98b3f2

^{viii} Davidson, Heather, “How Racism Against Native People Is Normalized, From Mascots to Costumes”,

^{ix} - “CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS A GUIDE FOR ALLIES.”

^x Clarren, Rebeca, "How America Is Failing Native American Students; *Punitive discipline, inadequate curriculum, and declining federal funding created an education crisis*". *The Nation*, July 24th, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/left-behind/>

^{xi} - "CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS A GUIDE FOR ALLIES."

^{xii} Austrew, Ashley, "Is There a Difference Between "Calling In" and "Calling Out"?", Dictionary.com, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/calling-in-vs-calling-out/>

^{xiii} (Seattle Art Museum, SAM Equity Team; Defining Micro-Aggression, PowerPoint.)