

[00:00:00.37] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. Welcome to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast we bring you another episode of "Let's Talk," by having a conversation about a very real phenomenon known as microaggression. What is it, and what do Toral and I think about this phenomenon? You'll find out on today's show. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:29.23] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:30.77] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:33.86] [THEME MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:39.98] As we start this particular episode, we just wanted to say thank you to everyone who's rated us and submitted a review on Apple Podcasts. Many of these people are part of the Cornell community, but some are also from places outside of Cornell. So we thought, as a way to start this particular episode, that we'd share these reviews with you all before we dive into microaggression. So Toral what's the first review that we've got?

[00:01:07.43] TORAL PATEL: So our first review came from listener JKleber13, and they wrote that they like the podcast because it's quick and it gives them some things to look into. Anthony, do we have any more reviews?

[00:01:18.80] ANTHONY SIS: We do. So we have one more from listener AEC Maynard. And they wrote that, quote, "it's a shot of perspective and a direction to dig deeper, reminds me of physical therapy. They do a wonderful job of providing a different perspective that makes you want to do more work to learn more. Great podcast. I highly recommend it," end quote. Thank you once again for the reviews. I just want to say that I think what really makes the show really great, and based off of these reviews, is really what our guests have shared and the vulnerability that they've showcased in terms of their leadership, their personal stories, and their lived experiences. The show is what it is because of the guests and because of just the great stories and takeaways that they've shared with us so far.

[00:02:05.54] TORAL PATEL: I would just add that the show was also as great as it is because of the listeners that we have. And so we want to thank all of you and also ask you not to be afraid to leave us a review. We might feature your review on the next episode. You never know.

[00:02:18.47] ANTHONY SIS: You never know. So don't be afraid. Send us a review. And we want to hear from you. So continue to do so. Thanks.

[00:02:25.23] TORAL PATEL: Yeah so let's now talk about microaggressions. Anthony, what is a microaggression? Can you define that for us a little bit?

[00:02:32.52] ANTHONY SIS: Sure. So a formal definition for microaggression is a brief and often subtle everyday event or interaction that belittles individuals because they are members of a particular group or groups. Now, here is my struggle with this particular term. I talk about this a lot in my trainings, especially when I talk about unconscious bias as well. But my main issue really is that there's nothing micro about a microaggression.

[00:02:59.57] So we hear the word microaggression, and it's a brief, often subtle, everyday event. However, the impact can really be not subtle. So I think about this one particular YouTube video that I've seen, where it talks about microaggression as mosquito bites and so how more people are prone to getting more mosquito bites than others. And so if you get more mosquito bites, and those mosquito bites being a microaggression, if you get 10 a day, 12 a day, 15 a day, 20 a day because of your own identities and your own lived experiences or the color of your skin or the way people perceive you to be externally in terms of your physical appearance, those things can be aggravating. And there's nothing micro about a microaggression because of that, right?

[00:03:44.69] They're aggravating. They're, as the term suggests, very aggressive. And so this YouTube video, just to go back to it a little bit, it uses humor, which I think is really great. I would totally recommend You Tubing it through Fusion Comedies, the specific channel where it's hosted. But I just think that that's my main issue with this term is that there's nothing micro about a microaggression. And I just want people to really understand that microaggressions can really have a really negative impact not just on the individual, but on an organization in terms of people feeling like they have a sense of belonging or even security or safety at times.

[00:04:18.86] And I don't know another synonym for the word or another term that kind of really emphasizes what a microaggression is that kind of gets to that piece around there's nothing micro about a microaggression. So that's just my struggle with this particular term. But I don't know what your thoughts are, Toral. I don't know.

[00:04:35.90] TORAL PATEL: No, I completely. I feel the same way. I understand where the word comes from, and I understand what it's trying to imply, right? So it's really kind of the focus is on the word micro. And the concept is it's little accelerate that belittle someone. It's the little things that happen every single day or constantly to an individual.

[00:04:53.73] And so I guess I get it that that's where the word micro comes in. But the impact is not little. The impact to an individual when they experience so many of these little acts, like you said, it's absolutely huge. So I agree that there is nothing micro about microaggressions. But I also understand kind of what they're trying to say by using the word micro.

[00:05:13.13] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I was thinking about the first time I experienced a microaggression that I can recall, like in my memory. And there's one that has consistently come up throughout the course of my life. And so it's this assumption that I am Mexican because I am Latino looking. I also speak Spanish. But I'm born here.

[00:05:32.97] And so people always assume, oh, because of those particular factors that are at play, I'm Mexican. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't have an issue with being perceived as Mexican. My main issue with that assumption is that it's the idea that every Latino- or Latina- or Latinx-looking person is going to be Mexican. And that's not always the case.

[00:05:51.45] Now, I also attribute this to where I grew up, which is Chicago, Illinois. And in Chicago, there are a lot of Mexicans. But there are also a lot of Puerto Ricans and a lot of other identities within the Latinx community. And so one particular incident that I can recall that really still strikes me to this day is when I was in fourth grade-- I believe I was in fourth grade. I actually might have been older. But there was this one girl in class. She was a white girl. And when I told where her I was from in terms of my family-- so my dad is from Guatemala, and my mom's from Puerto Rico. She was like, where's Guatemala?

[00:06:22.34] And I'm like, oh, it's right below Mexico. It's a small country. It's in Central America. And her response was, isn't that the same thing as Mexico? And I'm like, what? And here was the most irritating part about this, is that I remember the classroom set up and the visual, right? And so right behind in the classroom, there was a chalkboard with a huge world map.

[00:06:42.71] So I remember my response in that moment wanting to just be like, if you would have just turned around and looked at the map and get something so you can see a little bit closer right below Mexico, you are going to find a country that's called Guatemala. And so I just remember that experience being so irritating. And then when I got to high school, people once again continued to say, like, oh, are you Mexican?

[00:07:02.78] Or I always find it funny when people just assume I'm Mexican without even asking, right? And so like I said, there's nothing wrong with being perceived as Mexican, or I don't have any issue with that. It's just the assumption that it's every person that looks like me is going to be Mexican, when there's so many other Latin communities and ethnicities within Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and other Spanish-speaking countries. There's just so much diversity even within Latin America that one can be a part of, that it's not necessarily always Mexican.

[00:07:32.77] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I agree. I've had a lot of these little incidents growing up and younger years as well. And then obviously I think now that I'm older and in this field, I recognize it as slightly different and that they're more obvious and they're more in my face. Probably a couple of the big microaggressions that I've experienced growing up were one is I'm from India. And so India is technically part of Asia.

[00:07:56.24] And so when I identify myself as Asian, it's like, you get a look, right? Like, you're not Asian, right? Because there is already a stereotype that they've associated with this is what an Asian person looks like. And I somehow don't fit that mold. So that's usually the one that I remember distinctly growing up that I used to get all the time.

[00:08:14.24] And the other one is once they accept that I am Asian, it's like, oh, well, then you must be really smart, or this is easy for you. This is easy for you because you're Asian. You definitely must get all straight A's. And so it really negates all the hard work that I put into it, right? So yes, I did get good grades not because I understood everything or that it naturally came to me. It's because I worked really hard at it, right?

[00:08:37.01] And so those are probably the two when I was growing up. And then as I get older and I think in my career, the one that I get often, to this day, is, keeping in mind about my race and ethnicity, it's where people ask me what the best Indian restaurant in town is. And there will be a group of us standing there. And I get that question. I always have to debate how am I going to answer this question, right?

[00:08:58.94] And I usually answer it with a joke of some sort. It's how I deal with bias is by making a joke in return. So my traditional responses is, like, oh, at my house. Or my other response is, ew, I don't even like Indian food, just to kind of throw somebody completely off and make them realize, do you realize what you just asked me, right?

[00:09:20.63] The other one that I experience probably that at least I'm noticing more and more lately is gender biases. So it's the one where I'm expected to be making sure that I'm the one that's planning everything or to kind of take on the administrative roles. Or those kinds of components naturally can come my way, just keeping an eye out for those as well, that those do impact an individual.

[00:09:44.29] ANTHONY SIS: And sharing what you shared, Toral, reminds me of actually a joke that I also started doing too at one point in high school when people would ask me if I was Mexican. So because I just got so frustrated with how many times people would ask me or just assume that I was, I would oftentimes just be like, yeah, I'm from Mexico. And then they'd be like, what part? And then I'd be like, oh, I'm from Michoacan.

[00:10:04.52] So Michoacan is a particular area in Mexico. And a lot of my good friends are from Michoacan. They're either from there or they have family from there. So because of that, because I was it was more common area that I heard a lot of my friends were either from, I would just go along with it. And then a lot of times people would be like, oh, my gosh, you're from Michoacan. Me too!

[00:10:21.50] And then they'd be having all these conversations. Have you been to blah, blah? And I'm like, OK, pause. Just kidding. And they'd be like, oh, come on. I thought you were actually from Michoacan. I'm like, no, but it's just because so many people ask me or so many people make the assumption. I just, at one point, just started going along with it. So it just reminded me of that humor element.

[00:10:40.16] And that whole gender and administrative piece, too, I think that's so important because it's also unconscious, right? Well, it's unconscious, but it's a microaggression, though, right? It's like, why is it that women in certain roles constantly have to be in the service-oriented type roles or even doing specific actions? So

coordinating meetings, writing down notes, there's this automatic assumption that it goes to women but not to men or people who are perceived to be men, right?

[00:11:07.43] And so I get that a lot, too, in terms of people don't tell me certain things because they're like, oh, well, because you have xyz things. And it's like, OK, well, let's really dive deeper into this, right? Is it because you perceive me to be a man, because I present very masculine, even though identify as genderqueer. Let's break this down a little bit, right? We can divvy up these tasks, and they don't have to be assigned by gender. So I think that's definitely one that's super pervasive in the workforce.

[00:11:33.23] Now, Toral, as somebody who oversees the bias reporting tool here at Cornell, particularly, as it pertains to staff and faculty members, I'm just curious if you can just share a little bit with our listeners is this a huge issue at Cornell? Because I think sometimes the perception is that microaggression, or even incidents of unconscious bias, they don't happen as frequently or they don't happen as often as they do in other places. So I'm just wondering if you can just share a little bit about what you've seen come through in terms of the reports.

[00:12:01.33] TORAL PATEL: They do happen. I'll just start there. They do happen on our campus and across our various campuses as well. So we've received bias reports from multiple campuses, so not just the Ithaca community, but outside of Ithaca as well. And so yes, I just want to kind of dispel that notion that bias incidents don't happen across our campus, because they do.

[00:12:21.61] And I will be honest and say the university's stance on bias reports is educational in nature. And so most of the time, we end up having a conversation with the individual who committed the bias. And what you hear, it's unconscious. And so what I hear back, probably about 90% of the time, is I had no idea that's how that landed on somebody.

[00:12:41.20] So my goal is to really make people aware and really think, hopefully, that people are thinking twice before they're saying something. Or if they realize immediately that oh, what I just said was wrong, just coming up with ways so you can counter that. So we talk a lot about the concept of intent versus impact, right? And this is something that you mentioned earlier, that though my intentions are good, sometimes when an individual experiences microaggressions on a regular basis, the impact can be felt.

[00:13:08.83] Part of the educational component is we talk about, OK, well, what was the point? What were you trying to say? And how else could you present that information so it doesn't land the same way again?

[00:13:18.16] I do want to put a caveat out there that what I just described is a shortened version of a very large process that involves the bias pieces. So I do want to caution everyone to kind of find out the full process, just please visit our website. It's just diversity.cornell.edu.

[00:13:33.94] ANTHONY SIS: And we'll be sure to put a link in our show notes for this episode directly to the Bias Incidents page because it does have a lot of really great information. And I definitely do want our listeners, especially the Cornell community, to know a little bit more about bias reporting here at Cornell.

[00:13:48.97] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And as you mentioned earlier, you were asking how many types of incidents, what kinds of incidents happen. So we do post an annual report, and that's on that website as well. So Anthony, I have a question for you. As an individual who is involved in a lot of our diversity trainings across campus, what kinds of tricks and ideas have you shared with individuals on how to deal with bias?

[00:14:10.12] ANTHONY SIS: So in terms of tricks, you've got to acknowledge it. That's a trick, acknowledge it. Don't sweep it under the rug. I think a lot of times what I've seen not just here at Cornell, but in other places, too, of what I hear in terms of articles and obviously major incidents that have happened at Starbucks, at Sephora around bias is that the moment it gets swept under the rug, it becomes a bigger issue. So

[00:14:31.54] Part of really combating microaggressions at work is to acknowledge when it happens. There's a number of steps that I always put in my trainings around how to combat microaggressions, a number of steps, practices. I think practice. You have to practice putting things into action.

[00:14:48.77] And I say practice intentionally because when you practice you don't get it right the first, second, third time, probably not even the 10th time. But you have to do something in order for there to be a change. You can expect change. You can expect even a workplace to be anti-racist or not have any biases if there is no change happening in terms of people's behavior.

[00:15:08.36] So I think in regards specifically to microaggressions, what I say is you have to acknowledge when it happens. And you also have to be able to practice doing something about it in response to it. It doesn't necessarily mean that you are a bad person for committing the microaggression. But it does mean that you did something wrong and something should be done to correct that behavior in the future, and especially in that moment.

[00:15:30.50] And so there are three things that I normally emphasize for things to do in the moment. The first step is really to practice active listening. So what does that mean? It means to actually listen to what is being told to you is the issue in that moment.

[00:15:43.79] So I think a lot of times, especially when a microaggression happens, we get caught up in our own head space that we're terrible people, as I mentioned, or that we've done something wrong, or that this specific thing that I did or said is what was wrong. But if you actually listen and actively listen to what's being told to you, you might actually realize that, hey, that one thing that I thought I did wrong might have not been the issue in the first place. You can definitely learn a lot more by actually actively

listening to what is being told to you in that moment as opposed to getting caught up in the language and the things that we're telling ourselves internally.

[00:16:15.20] And so what I tell people is not necessarily to turn it off, but just to mute it because it is hard to turn it off right away. But to just simply mute it and to actively listen means to listen to what other people are telling you in that moment may or may not be the issue at play. Now, the second piece is also owning your impact.

[00:16:32.54] So we are always super quick-- always super quick-- to say, well, that wasn't our intention, if we say something wrong, or that wasn't what I meant. But what would it mean for us to say, that wasn't my intent, but I recognize that this is the impact that it's had on you. I think that can go a long way, too. And that definitely can go a long way in that moment, even if you don't understand it.

[00:16:53.18] And I think there's also a myth-- and we could probably talk about this on another episode-- of what it means to understand difference or what it means to understand something. Because sometimes there are some things we may never understand. And so I think in this particular context of what we're talking about with microaggressions, the goal isn't to understand it in that moment. It's simply to just acknowledge that there was harm that you may have caused in your statement or in your actions and then moving forward, committing to a plan of action to committing to actually changing that behavior.

[00:17:21.14] So if you know that what this particular word or these particular actions or words caused on someone else, being able to say, I'm sorry, which is another thing, to, which can really go a long way-- you don't have to say, "I'm sorry, but," because the moment you say the word "but--"

[00:17:36.25] TORAL PATEL: It negates the "sorry," yeah.

[00:17:38.29] ANTHONY SIS: Exactly. So if you need to say another word, you can say "I'm sorry, and" or "I'm sorry," period, also goes a long way. So I'm sorry, period. I recognize that this is the impact of what I said or what I did, even though that wasn't my intent. However, I recognize that this is the impact. And moving forward, here is what I'm going to do to correct this behavior.

[00:17:59.56] And all of this happens-- so another key thing that I always remind people is all of this happens within seconds. You don't have time to process in that moment. You don't have time to think about it. But if you commit to practicing this particular language, speech, script, however you want to call, it if you commit to practicing this, and as you get better and as you enhance it, then it's just going to become habit when these types of incidents do happen in the moment. So that's what I would say. But, Toral, I don't know if there's anything else you would add.

[00:18:26.77] TORAL PATEL: No, I think that's perfect. That's absolutely perfect. The way you stated it is great.

Episode 34: Let's Talk...Microaggressions
Released on February 5, 2021

[00:18:32.70] ANTHONY SIS: That's it for today's show. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts. And rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:18:53.05] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:18:58.81] ANTHONY SIS: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity, in collaboration with the Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:19:07.22] TORAL PATEL: We would like to thank our co-producer and sound engineer Bert Odom-Reed, as always, for making it sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:19:15.28] ANTHONY SIS AND TORAL PATEL: Thanks, Bert.