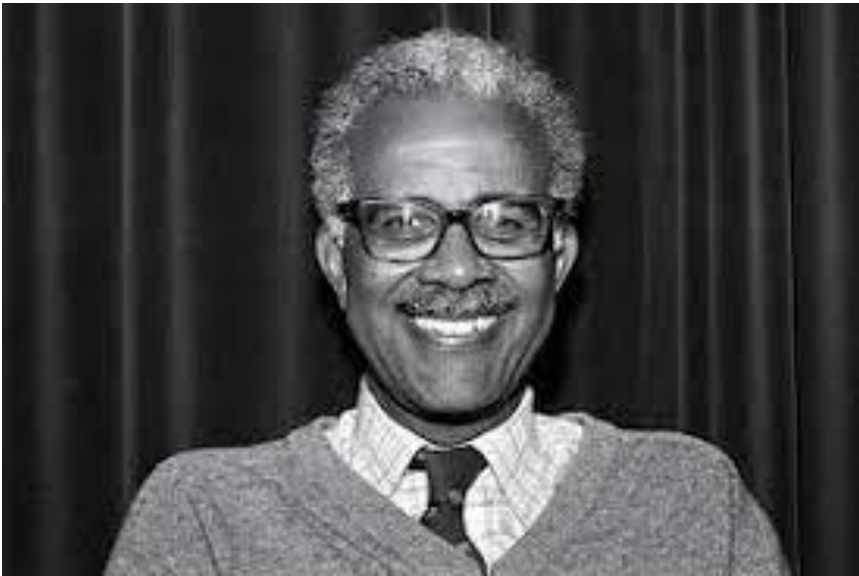# Microaggressions:
Unintentional but Impactful Acts of Bias

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Microaggressions are one manifestation of *unconscious bias.*

In the 1970s, **Chester Pierce**, a Harvard-trained psychiatrist, was the first to use the term *microaggressions*, defining them as **"black-white racial interactions [that] are characterized by white put-downs, done in an automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion."**


In 2007, psychologist **Derald Sue** and colleagues expanded on Pierce's conceptualization by defining racial microaggressions as "**brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.**"

Unconscious bias is rooted in System 1 cognition.

There are are two basic modes of cognition – System 1 ("Fast") and System 2 ("Slow") – that correspond to different ways of processing information and are controlled by evolutionarily older (System 1) and newer (System 2) parts of the brain.
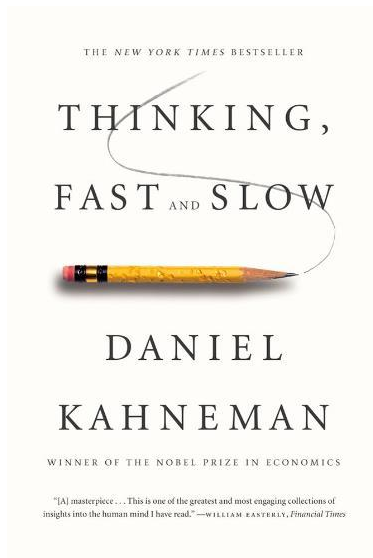
Further reading:
Smith, E. R., & DeCoster, J. (2000). Dual-process models in social and cognitive psychology: Conceptual integration and links to underlying memory systems. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4(2), 108-131.*
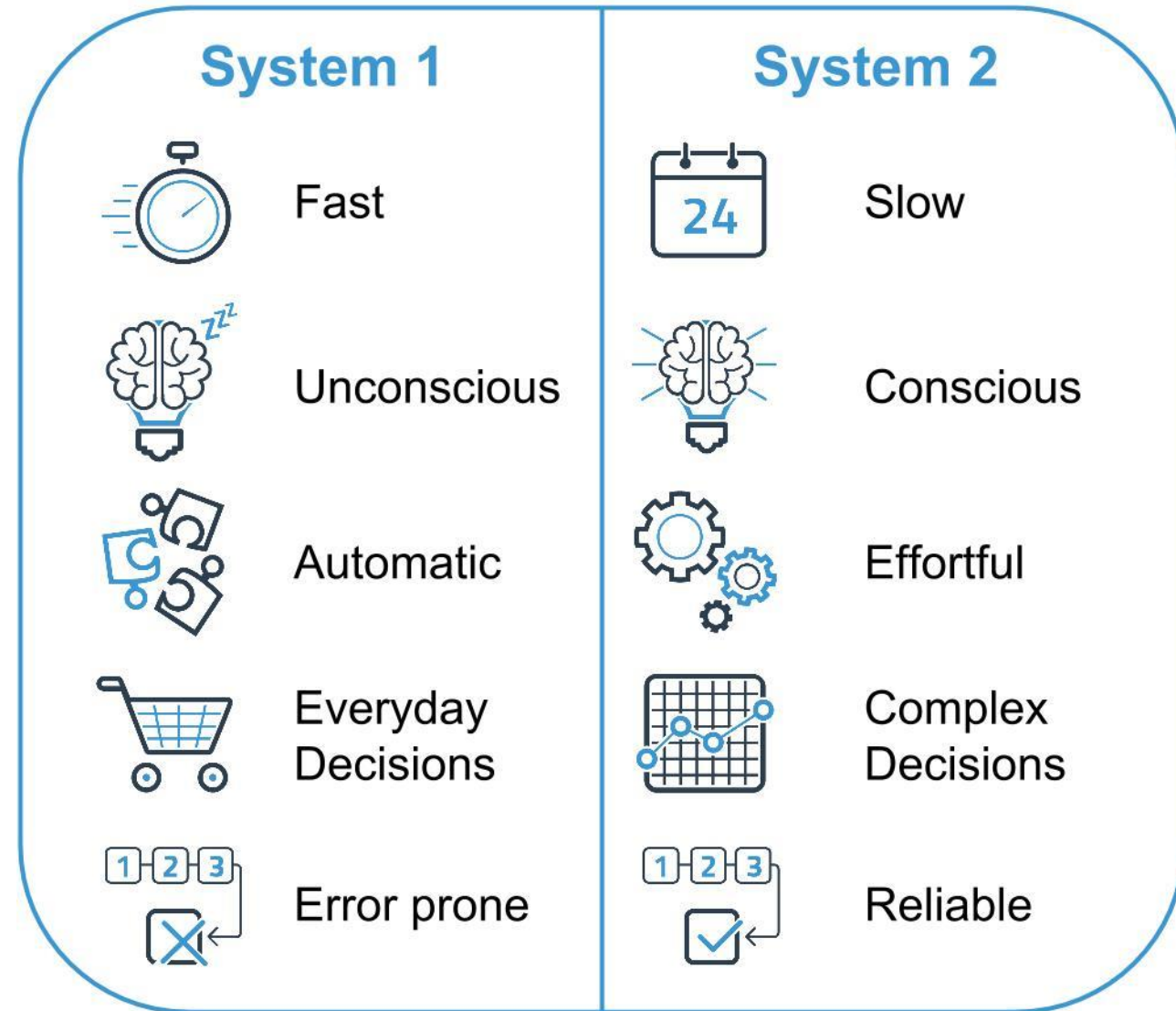
One key mechanism of System 1 thinking is the formation of **schemas:** mental structures that bundle learned associations in memory for automatic retrieval
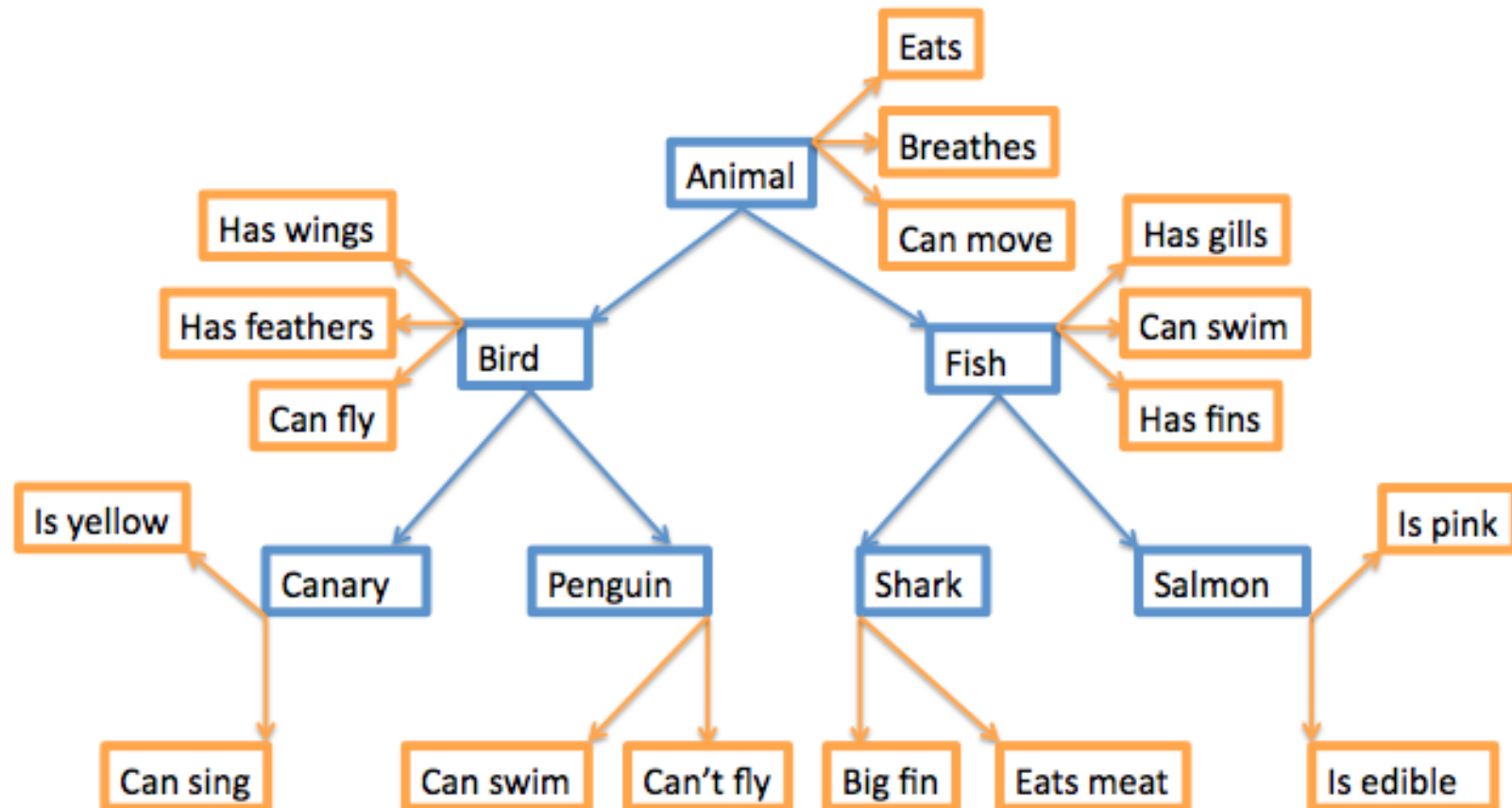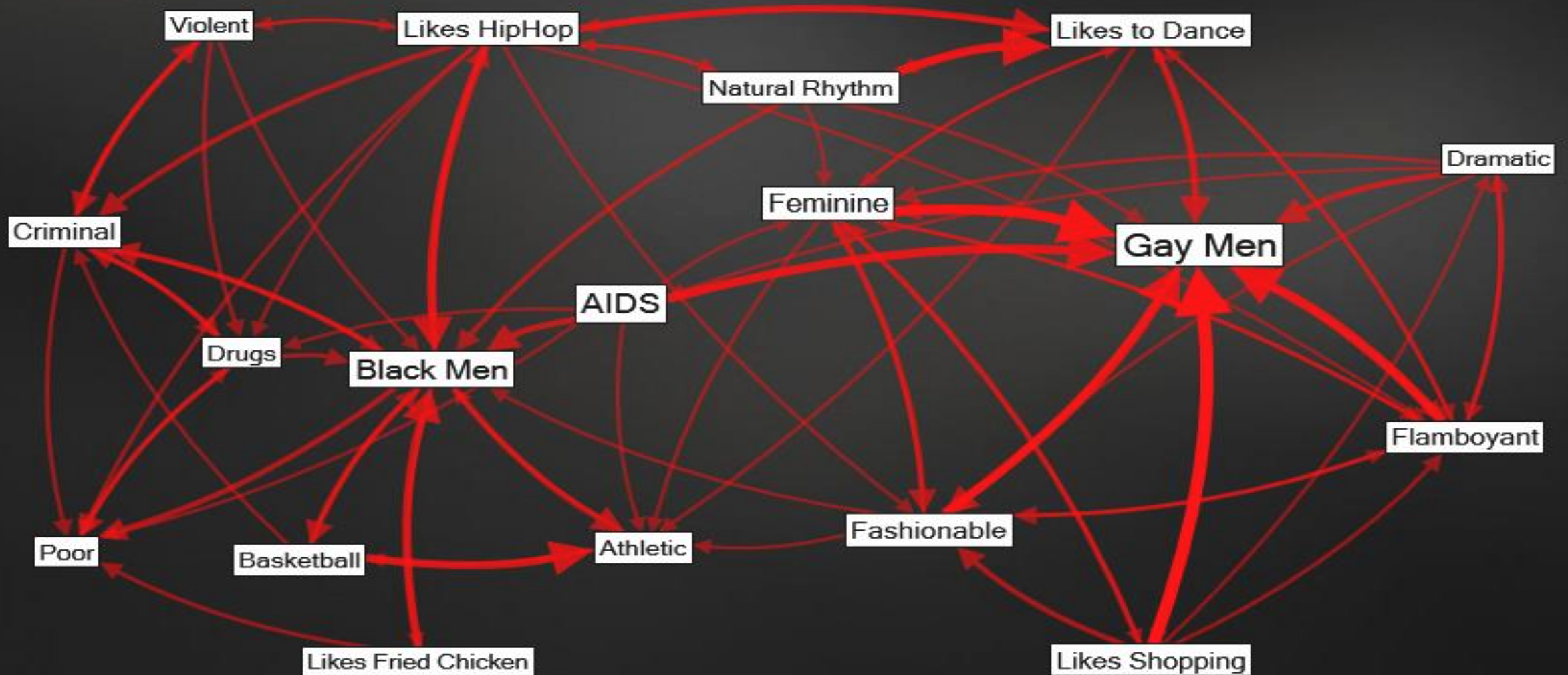
Learned stereotypes inevitably become integrated into our schemas for social identity categories – and strengthened via repeated exposure.

Racist or racially insensitive comments are about as common across groups

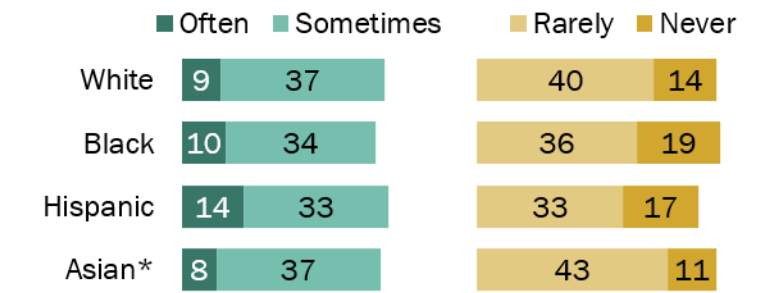*% saying they _____ hear friends or family members of their racial background make comments or jokes that might be considered racist or racially insensitive about other racial groups*

Legend: ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
White	9	37	40	14
Black	10	34	36	19
Hispanic	14	33	33	17
Asian*	8	37	43	11

*Asians were interviewed in English only.
Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. Whites, blacks and Asians include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-Feb. 5, 2019. "Race in America 2019"
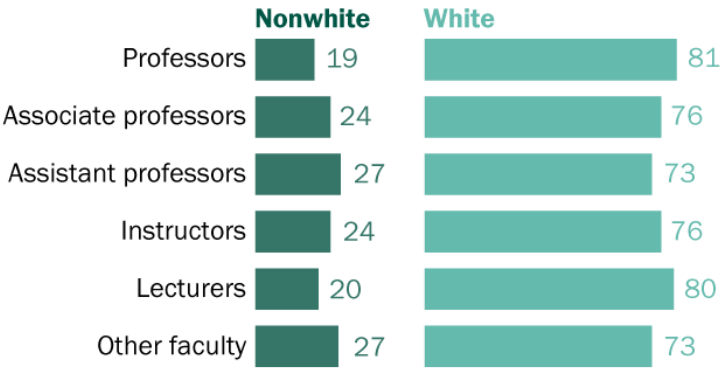
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Michigan official's use of racial slur prompts governor to call for his resignation

"The Governor has been very clear – there's no place for hate and racism in Michigan," Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said in a statement.

Rosalia
@BonKamona

I saw a tweet saying "Google unprofessional hairstyles for work". I did. Then I checked the 'professional' ones 🙃🙃🙃

RETWEETS 141   LIKES 41

2:04 PM - 5 Apr 2016

Nonwhites make up a comparatively small share of U.S. college faculty

% of postsecondary faculty who are _____, by academic rank, fall 2017

	Nonwhite	White
Professors	19	81
Associate professors	24	76
Assistant professors	27	73
Instructors	24	76
Lecturers	20	80
Other faculty	27	73

Note: "Nonwhite" includes blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians or Alaska Natives, and those of two or more races. Those categorized as "non-resident alien" and "race/ethnicity unknown" are not included in this analysis.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

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Examples of Microaggressions (part of *Moments@CMU* project)

Exclusions	Insults/Invalidations	False Assumptions
CMU created a Pittsburgh map for new students, staff, and faculty – and left off all of the predominantly Black neighborhoods	A professor tells his class: "Make your application so intuitive even your mother or grandmother could understand it."	A trans student is repeatedly mis-gendered, even on Zoom, where they display their pronouns prominently
An organization continues to use schedule polling option that is not accessible to screen readers even after a message about this issue goes out to the group	"You don't *seem* gay to me at all. You're so girly!" – comment received by a lesbian staff member in casual conversation with a colleague	"Oh wow, you can play basketball in your wheelchair? How does that work?" – comment received by person with a disability
Many women and BIPOC students, staff, and faculty report experience of being interrupted in meetings and/or having others get credit for ideas initially offered by them (and ignored)	"I'd give anything to be Jewish. You guys get to take so many vacation days for holidays!" – one classmate to another after Yom Kippur	Asian American CMU community members report being asked where they're from repeatedly (with a response such as "New Jersey" eliciting confused looks or follow-up questions)

Debate about the concept of microaggressions

Some psychologists – most notably, Scott Lilienfeld, have questioned the validity and usefulness of the concept. Among the arguments:

- "If person A is offended by a statement but person B is not, this would mean it both is and is not a microaggression, a proposition that is patently illogical."
- "Encouraging individuals to be on the lookout for subtle, in some cases barely discernible, signs of prejudice in others puts just about everyone on the defensive."

Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 138-169.

At the same time, other scholars believe that:
- use of the prefix "micro" minimizes the damage done and allows others to claim to targets are "overreacting" or being "overly sensitive."

Others have questioned whether the concept of microaggressions:
- promotes a sense of victimhood
- casts members of marginalized groups as weak and deficient or in need of "rescuing"

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Microaggressions & "Attributional Ambiguity"

Because microaggressions are subtle and can occur quickly in interpersonal interactions, it can be hard to fully perceive what has happened, leaving the target second-guessing whether they fundamentally misperceived the behavior (e.g., did they simply mishear what the person said?).

It can be difficult to distinguish microaggressions from other sorts of covertly rude or disrespectful behavior. In such cases, there are plausible alternative explanations for the behavior and no clear evidence to suggest which might be correct (e.g., is the professor who ignores or miscredits a woman of color's comments in a meeting just rude or is he more likely to exhibit this behavior with women of color?)

In other cases, the behavior may have more innocuous explanations. For example, certain forms of forgetfulness might be innocuous (e.g., someone being prone to forget names) but other forms might constitute microaggressions (e.g., the tendency to forget names associated with certain cultural or ethnic groups, misremembering names in a stereotyped way, or confusing the names of members of the same group)

Because microaggressions are perceptually "nebulous," they often leave the target to second-guess what has happened, especially if others are inclined to accept an alternative, innocuous explanation or have failed to perceive the behavior altogether.

Friedlaender, C. (2021). Microaggressions and the Problem of Attributional Ambiguity. In *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language* (pp. 232-246). Routledge.

Disarming Microaggressions with "Microinterventions"

Sue et al. (2019) proposed a set of strategies for counteracting microaggressions:

Strategy	Examples
Make the "Invisible" Visible	Ask for clarification Challenge the stereotype
Disarm the Microaggression	Express disagreement State values and set limits Interrupt and redirect Use non-verbal communication
Educate the Offender	Appeal to offender's values and principles Differentiate between intent and impact Promote empathy ("call in" versus "call out")
Seek External Intervention	Report the act Attend support groups Seek support through spirituality or community

Ambiguity about Responsibility to Respond to Microaggressions

On the one hand, one may argue that members of privileged groups ought to have a stronger responsibility to call out other members of their identity group, such as men calling out other men for expressions or acts of gender bias.
--However, this can lead to the problem of speaking for or over members of the targeted individual's identity group.
--Furthermore, members of dominant groups are not always in the best position to realize whether a microaggression has occurred or, even if they are aware, to explain why, exactly, the act was sexist or racist.

On the other hand, it is problematic to assume that members of marginalized groups have such a responsibility because this creates an additional burden of having to educate members of privileged groups – which can be exhausting, time-consuming, and even risky, constituting an additional harm on top of the microaggression itself.

Is the current zeitgeist of "cancel culture" exacerbating the issue?
-Reducing likelihood of targets or observers of microaggressions from speaking out (for fear of being labeled as a "canceler")?
-Conversely, rendering targets or observers unwilling or uninterested in engaging in a dialogue with perpetrator (i.e., "canceling" empathy or dialogue)?
-Increasing the defensiveness of perpetrators (who can minimize claims of microaggressive acts as "canceling")?

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The negative impact of microaggressions is anything but ambiguous.

Repeated, **cumulative** experiences with microaggressions have been associated with many negative consequences for health and well-being, including:

- **stress** (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010)
- **anxiety** (Banks et al., 2006; Blume et al., 2012)
- **depression** (Huynh, 2012; Nadal et al., 2014)
- **symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder** (Williams, Printz, & DeLapp, 2018)
- **low self-esteem** (Nadal et al., 2014; Thai et al., 2017)
- **substance use** (Clark et al., 2015; Gerrard et al., 2012)
- **reduced self-efficacy** (Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015)

"[At Princeton] I felt like a visitor landing in an alien country. I have spent my years since Princeton, while at law school, and in my various professional jobs, not feeling completely a part of the worlds I inhabit."
—Sonia Sotomayor, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice at the table, and belonging is having that voice be heard.
- Liz Fosslien

Micah Johnson
@jomicah24

#BlackintheIvory Feeling dread every time you have to ask a prof to re-explain something out of fear of being looked at like you're dumb or being met with "maybe this isn't the right field for you" while your peers receive enthusiastic responses for asking the same questions.

10:35 AM · Jun 8, 2020

♡ 24   See Micah Johnson's other Tweets

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Coping and Resistance Mechanisms
(Spanierman et al., 2021)

Members of marginalized groups are not passive victims and can engage strategies of resilience and resistance to disarm the destructive power of microaggressions.

Collective Coping: seeking connection, validation, and support from family, friends, and one's community, as well as establishing personal and professional networks
- "Collective uplift": affirming the value, worth, and beauty of one another in one's friend/family groups or community groups

Resistance Coping: actively defying stereotypes and oppressive norms that allow microaggressions to go unaddressed
- "Counterspaces": spaces where marginalized individuals and allies foster resistance through collective action, joy, and healing

Self-Protective Coping: self-care activities to relieve tension and to self-soothe from the pain of microaggressions
- Examples: individual reflection and processing of event; picking one's battles and conserving time/energy; culturally relevant practices to reinforce group pride; disengagement from threatening contexts or people
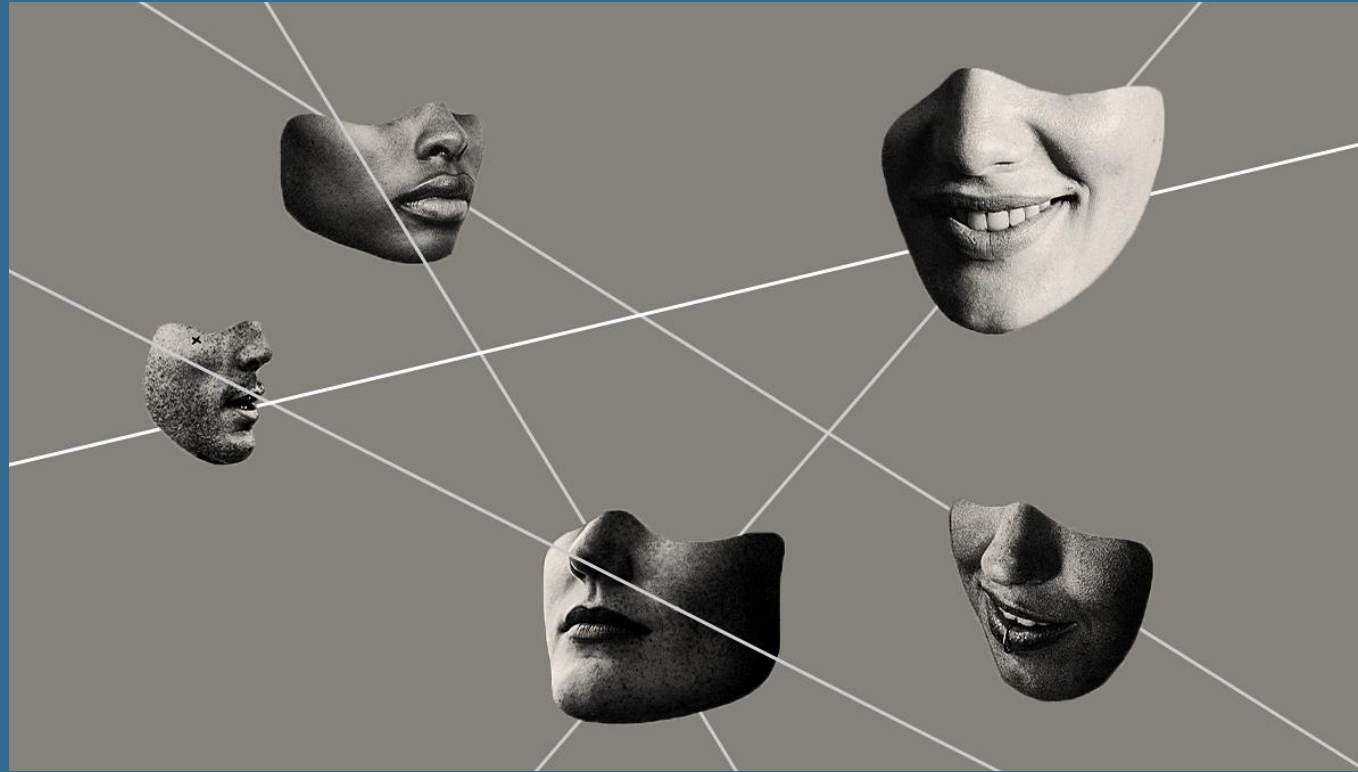
Microaggressions:
Foundational Concepts and Research Evidence

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