

In the community social services sector, microaggressions, which are often described as “subtle acts of exclusion,” can undermine psychological safety and a sense of belonging in the workplace<sup>[2]</sup>. Leaders and staff share a joint responsibility in recognizing and addressing these behaviors to create a culture of respect and inclusion. Microaggressions may seem small, but they can add up and have a cumulative effect that communicates “you don’t belong”. This can erode trust, lower morale, and reduce engagement over time, ultimately harming employees and clients<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Understanding Microaggressions

Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal interpersonal exchanges in which a person causes harm to someone, whether intended or unintended. Studies have shown that microaggressions can lead to significant emotional distress for individuals who experience them. There are three types of microaggressions: microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults<sup>[4]</sup>.



### Microinvalidations

These are often unintentional comments or actions that dismiss or negate the experiences or feelings of marginalized individuals<sup>[4]</sup>.

### Microinsults

These are often unintentional behaviours or comments that display rudeness, insensitivity or demean a persons’ heritage, identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation identity<sup>[4]</sup>.

### Microassaults

These are overt, intentional acts of discrimination or hostility<sup>[4]</sup>.

## Recognizing Microaggressions<sup>[3]</sup>

Microaggression:	Type:	Message:	Respectful/Equitable Alternatives
“Where are you really from?”	Microinsult	You are a foreigner.	Avoid making assumptions about others’ backgrounds. <sup>[2]</sup>
“Wow, you are so articulate.”	Microinsult	It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.	“You made great points.” <sup>[2]</sup>
“You don’t look disabled.”	Microinsult	Disabled individuals have a specific appearance.	Offer support without making assumptions.
“I don’t see color, I treat everyone the same.”	Microinvalidation	Denies the unique experiences of people of color	“I respect your experiences.” <sup>[2]</sup>
Promoting individuals based on race/gender.	Microassault	Individuals from other races/ genders are not qualified.	Organization implements transparent documented, measurable promotion policies that managers and employees are aware of.
Intentionally misgendering or using someone’s birth name after they have introduced themselves with a different name or pronoun	Microassault	The person’s identity isn’t valid or respected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational Respectful Workplace Training;</li> <li>• Clear bullying and harassment reporting procedures communicated to employees;<sup>[5]</sup></li> <li>• Offer support and resources to affected persons.</li> </ul>

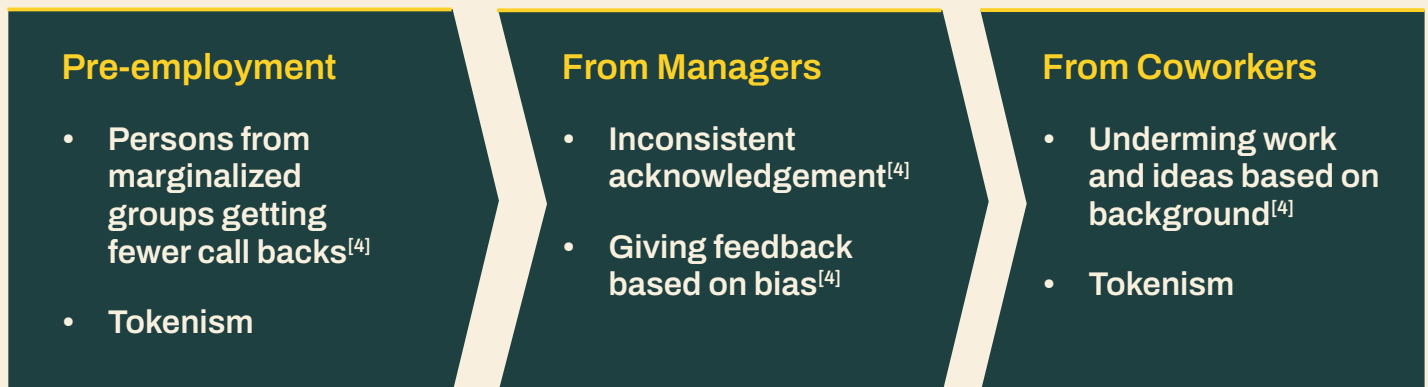
As we look at the various microaggressions that can occur in the workplace, it’s important to also consider how these behaviors can intersect with issues of tokenism. Tokenism happens when marginalized individuals are included to check a diversity box rather than recognized for their skills and contributions. For example, hiring a person with a disability to meet a quota, without offering growth opportunities, reduces their role to “diversity hire” status, overlooking their unique abilities<sup>[6]</sup>

### Reflection

1. The “Respectful/Equitable Alternatives” above are not exhaustive. What are some alternative responses and initiatives that comes to mind?
2. How can organizations genuinely include diverse voices in ways that go beyond simply meeting diversity quotas?

## The Employee Experience

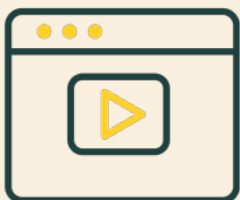
Beyond tokenism, microaggressions also manifest throughout the employee lifecycle. From hiring to day-to-day interactions, the experiences of marginalized employees can be shaped by subtle exclusions and biases. Let's explore how microaggressions can show up at various stages of the employee experience<sup>[4]</sup>.



### Reflection

1. Research studies show that persons from marginalized groups get less call-backs during the recruitment process<sup>[4]</sup>. Blind recruiting where information such as names, gender/pronouns, age/graduation dates are left out are shown to have efficacy<sup>[4]</sup>. How might blind recruiting impact not only the diversity of an organization but also the overall sense of inclusivity and belonging?
2. How might organizations ensure that bias doesn't reappear in later stages of the hiring process, such as interviews or onboarding?

### Tips for Dealing with Microaggressions at Work



To further illustrate the impact of microaggressions on employees, let's watch a short video that highlights what microaggressions can look like in the workplace and offers practical insights on how to address them.

[Click here to watch the video](#)

In the video above, the author mentioned that someone on the receiving end of microaggression in the workplace can take the following steps:

- Set up the situation
- Objectively describe the behaviour and get clarification
- Explain the Impact of the behaviour/words.
- Do differently by working together to find solutions

Can you think of a time when you felt uncomfortable or disrespected in the workplace due to a comment or behavior? How could you have set up the situation to share your perspective, and how might you objectively describe the behavior to seek clarification? What steps could you take to express the impact of this behavior and, if possible, work together toward a better solution?

## From Bystander to Ally

Bystanders often witness microaggressions but remain silent, whereas allies take active steps to address and challenge harmful behaviors. Becoming an ally requires a commitment to standing up for others and ensuring that microaggressions don't go unchallenged <sup>[2]</sup>.

*“The goal of bystander intervention isn't to call-out, blame or embarrass a co-worker. The goal is to compassionately help persons stay connected to persons they could possibly have alienated”*  
(“Subtle Acts of Exclusion”)

Here are some guidelines on how a bystander can become an ally:



### Case Study

In this case study, we follow Jane, a frontline worker who faces microaggressions related to her language skills and her role in diversity initiatives. By analyzing her experiences, we can pinpoint specific microaggressions, explore their effects, and discuss how she—and others—could respond more effectively

Jane, a frontline worker who speaks English as a second language, hears remarks like, “Your English is really good,” during meetings. When she shares thoughtful suggestions for improving services, the team’s discussion subtly shifts without directly acknowledging her. Later, a colleague presents a similar idea, which is received warmly. Jane

also notices that she is repeatedly asked to participate in public-facing diversity initiatives, making her feel singled out. Over time, these experiences weigh on her, creating a sense of exclusion, which her supervisor begins to notice and reflect on.

### Reflection

1. What types of Microaggressions can you pinpoint from this case study? If you were Jane, how do you think this would affect you at work and in your personal life?
2. Jane’s co-worker meant “your English is very good” as a compliment. They are confused as to why this could be harmful to Jane. What approach would you take in explaining how this could be harmful to the co-worker?
3. Psychologists have described Microaggression as a “death by a thousand paper cuts” to describe its harmful cumulative effect. How does the idea of microaggressions being a “death by a thousand paper cuts” help us understand their impact on individuals, and what can we do to reduce their occurrence in our daily interactions?
4. In what ways does Jane’s experience with tokenism—being asked to represent her cultural background without genuine inclusion—highlight the challenges faced by individuals in diverse workplaces, and how can we ensure that participation in diversity initiatives feels meaningful rather than performative?
5. How can you commit to reducing microaggressions in your own interactions?

## References

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