Microaggressions Matter

They may not always be ill-intentioned, but the slights illuminate deeper problems in America.

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When I was studying at Oberlin College, a fellow student once compared me to her dog.

Because my name is Simba, a name Americans associate with animals, she unhelpfully shared that her dog's name was also Simba. She froze with embarrassment, realizing that her remark could be perceived as debasing and culturally insensitive.

It's a good example of what social-justice activists term microaggressions—behaviors or statements that do not necessarily reflect malicious intent but which nevertheless can inflict insult or injury.

I wasn't particularly offended by the dog comparison. I found it amusing at best and tone deaf at worst.

But other slights cut deeper. As an immigrant, my peers relentlessly inquired, "How come your English is so good?"—as if eloquence were beyond the intellectual reach of people who look like me. An African American friend once asked an academic advisor for information about majoring in biology and, without being asked about her academic record (which was excellent), was casually directed to "look up less-challenging courses in African American Studies instead."

I, too, have sometimes made what turned out to be deeply offensive remarks unintentionally. So I am in no rush to conclude that any of these people harbor ill intent. In fact, they're probably well-meaning and good-hearted people.

But the fact remains that those words were fundamentally inappropriate and offensive. Even though I don't think the student really meant to compare me to a dog, the incident nonetheless stayed with me. The *impact* of her words and actions mattered more than her intent. It is all too easy to hurt and insult others without exercising vigilance in interacting with those whose lived experiences are different than our own.

This particularly matters in the context of universities. Colleges are charged with providing an education in an environment in which everyone feels welcome. However, for historical reasons, people of color, LGBT people, and others who do not conform to the dominant demographics prevalent at most institutions of higher education in this country already don't always feel included or welcome. As campaigns like I too am Harvard or the satirical film *Dear White People* have attempted to illustrate, microaggressions targeted at minorities only serve to amplify those feelings of alienation.

This is because microaggressions point out cultural difference in ways that put the recipient's non-conformity into sharp relief, often causing anxiety and crises of belonging on the part of minorities. When your peers at a prestigious university express dismay at the ability of a person of color to master English, it calls your presence in that institution into question and magnifies your difference in ways that can be alienating. It can even induce imposter syndrome or stereotype threat, both of which I have felt while studying at Oberlin. The former is feeling insecure, undeserving, or unaccomplished enough to be in a particular setting while latter is the debilitation that can arise from the constant fear of validating a stereotype about people from your identity groupings.

The turn towards political correctness in academia, to which the concept of microaggressions belongs, is sometimes mischaracterized as an obsession with the creation of victims or shoehorning radically liberal ideas into college students. Others have argued that political correctness evangelizes a new kind of moral righteousness that over-privileges identity politics and silences conservative viewpoints.

What these critics miss is that the striving for "PC culture" on college campuses is actually rooted in empathy. The basic tenets of this culture are predicated on the powerful impulse to usher both justice and humanity into everyday social transactions. Given the visible (albeit slow) rise in diversity on campuses, the lexicon of social justice invites students to engage with difference in more intelligent and nuanced ways, and to train their minds to entertain more complex views of the world.

Take for instance, the prevalent use of non-traditional gender pronouns at Oberlin College, a practice becoming increasingly common elsewhere, as well. They acknowledge that people can identify with many genders, not just along the binary of male and female. Using a person's preferred or desired gender pronouns (such as the gender neutral "they" instead of she or he) is not a meaningless exercise in identity politics—it is an acknowledgement of a person's innermost identity, conferring both respect and dignity.

The ability to deftly navigate these finely textured strata of diversity in the face of changing demographics and societal values, coupled with the intensification of globalization, is a skill that can only pay dividends for all students as they prepare to confront a future that will be marked by an intricate pluralism.

Last week, my colleague Conor Friedersdorf cited the website Oberlin Microaggressions as an example of political correctness run amok. Unearthing one extreme confrontation between a white student and a Hispanic student over the former's allegedly appropriative use of a Spanish word, ignoring many more obviously offensive examples on the site, Friedersdorf extrapolated from that single incident to argue that Oberlin is the archetype of a malignant "victimhood culture" in which college students are instrumentalizing oppression as a means to accumulate higher social standing through eliciting sympathy from others.

He quoted from a sociological study that supports his argument:

> The culture on display on many college and university campuses, by way of contrast, is "characterized by concern with status and sensitivity to slight combined with a heavy reliance on third parties … Domination is the main form of deviance, and victimization a way of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth, the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization."

But there is nothing glamorous about being subjected to racism, and certainly no social rewards to be reaped from being the victim of oppression in a society that heaps disadvantage on historically marginalized groups. So why would people willingly designate themselves as victims if they do not truly feel that way? The only people who benefit from oppression are the ones who are exempt from it—not the ones who suffer through it.

The study quoted by Friedersdorf chastises those who mobilize in response to the injustices they perceive. He cosigns the definition of microaggressions as "a form of social control in which the aggrieved collect and publicize accounts of intercollective offenses, making the case that relatively minor slights are part of a larger pattern of injustice and that those who suffer them are socially marginalized and deserving of sympathy."

But it makes sense that marginalized groups would attempt to form coalitions and enlist allies. They are severely underrepresented on most campuses. At Oberlin, for instance, black students form only 5.2 percent of students, Hispanic students 7.2 percent, and Asian Americans 4.2 percent. Minorities, by virtue of their being in the minority, do not and cannot exert robust social control of any kind at elite universities like Oberlin. When appealing to other students and administrators for validation and support after encountering discrimination, such students are scarcely clamoring to be seen as victims. They're grasping to gain some small degree of power that can amplify their voices, where their concerns are so often silenced or ignored.

It's the persistence of exclusion, alienation, and discrimination within the academy that spurs the emergence of sites like Oberlin Microaggressions at Smith, Swarthmore, and other colleges in the first place. In the case of Oberlin, the site was formed in direct response to a series of racist incidents, and the persistent harassment of students and faculty of color that included defacing of Black History Month posters with the N-word. Oberlin's reputation as an extremely liberal college led many to dismiss claims of racism. The site was built to catalogue these experiences as proof of the various ways in which racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination were, in fact, commonplace.

Those who disagree with paying attention to microaggressions often argue that they are much ado about nothing. Why can't these minor slights be ignored, easily forgiven, or graciously laughed into disappearance? Viewed within the context of seemingly larger problems, the entire notion of microaggressions can seem trivial.

These critics have a point: There are indeed some microaggressions that may not be worth interrogating or intellectualizing. The internet, in particular, has contributed to an exhausting cycle of retributive outrage that spins the smallest error into a scandal. But at the same time,

microaggressions do not emerge from a vacuum. Often, they expose the internalized prejudices that lurk beneath the veneer of our carefully curated public selves.

It is certainly worth exploring microaggressions on the basis of their link to implicit biases, and the ways in which they can both telegraph and contribute to the proliferation of more invidious, macro-level prejudices. Implicit biases have serious material consequences beyond hurt feelings, from discriminatory hiring to racial inequities in policing and the broader U.S. criminal-justice system. In other words, microaggressions matter because they seem to be both symptoms and causes of larger structural problems.

The call to downplay microaggressions also underestimates the powerful effect of sanctioning them instead. Calling out microaggressions can serve as a deterrent. From the perspective of social-justice advocates, accountability incentivizes more thoughtful communication across lines of gender, race, sexuality, and gender identity. It codifies the empathy that can help lead to a more inclusive atmosphere.

Critics will argue that political correctness is addicted to shutting out opposing views. That gets it backwards. Only the empathy fostered by the dictates of political correctness can help us productively encounter difference.