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Students See Many Sights as Racial 'Microaggressions'



A student gave a monologue this month during a performance in Cambridge, Mass., of the play "I, Too, Am Harvard," in which he described being mistaken for a waiter at a formal university function.

GRETCHEN ERTL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By TANZINA VEGA
March 21, 2014

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — A tone-deaf inquiry into an Asian-American's ethnic origin. Cringe-inducing praise for how articulate a black student is. An unwanted conversation about a Latino's ability to speak English without an accent.

This is not exactly the language of traditional racism, but in an avalanche of blogs, student discourse, campus theater and academic papers, they all reflect the murky terrain of the social justice word du jour — microaggressions — used to describe the subtle ways that racial, ethnic, gender and other stereotypes can play out painfully in an increasingly diverse culture.

On a Facebook page called "Brown University Micro/Aggressions" a "dark-skinned black person" describes feeling alienated from conversations about racism on campus. A digital photo project run by a Fordham University student about "racial microaggressions" features minority students holding up signs with comments like "You're really pretty ... for a dark-skin girl." The "St. Olaf Microaggressions" blog includes a letter asking David R. Anderson, the college's president, to address "all of the incidents and microaggressions that go unreported on a daily basis."

What is less clear is how much is truly aggressive and how much is pretty micro — whether the issues raised are a useful way of bringing to light often elusive slights in a world where overt prejudice is seldom tolerated, or a new form of divisive hypersensitivity, in which casual remarks are blown out of proportion.



Audience members at the performance.
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The word itself is not new — it was first used by Dr. Chester M. Pierce, a professor of education and psychiatry at Harvard University, in the 1970s. Until recently it was considered academic talk for race theorists and sociologists.

The recent surge in popularity for the term can be attributed, in part, to an academic article Derald W. Sue, a psychology professor at Columbia University, published in 2007 in which he broke down microaggressions into microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Dr. Sue, who has literally written the book on the subject, called “Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation,” attributed the increased use of the term to the rapidly changing demographics in which minorities are expected to outnumber whites in the United States by 2042. “As more and more of us are around, we talk to each other and we know we’re not crazy,” Dr. Sue said. Once, he said, minorities kept silent about perceived slights. “I feel like people of color are less inclined to do that now,” he said.

Some say challenges to affirmative action in recent years have worked to stir racial tensions and resentments on college campuses. At least in part as a result of a blog started by two Columbia University students four years ago called The Microaggressions Project, the word made the leap from the academic world to the free-for-all on the web. Vivian Lu, the co-creator of the site, said she has received more than 15,000 submissions since she began the project.

To date, the site has had 2.5 million page views from 40 countries. Ms. Lu attributed the growing popularity of the term to its value in helping to give people a way to name something that may not be so obvious. “It gives people the vocabulary to talk about these everyday incidents that are quite difficult to put your finger on,” she said.

Video | Microaggressions: Comments That Sting Across college campuses and social media, younger generations have started to challenge those fleeting comments that seem innocent but leave uneasy feelings behind.



To Serena Rabie, 22, a paralegal who graduated from the University of Michigan in 2013, “This is racism 2.0.” She added: “It comes with undertones, it comes with preconceived notions. You hire the Asian computer programmer because you think he’s going to be a good programmer because he’s Asian.” Drawing attention to microaggressions, whether they are intentional or not, is part of eliminating such stereotypes, Ms. Rabie said.

On the other hand, John McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia University, said many of his students casually use the word when they talk about race, but he cautioned against lumping all types of off-key language together. Assuming a black student was accepted to an elite university purely because of affirmative action? “That’s abuse,” Dr. McWhorter said. “That’s a slur.” Being offended when a white person claims to be colorblind — a claim often derided by minorities who say it willfully ignores the reality of race? Not so fast.

“I think that’s taking it too far,” he said. Whites do not have the same freedom to talk about race that nonwhites do, Dr. McWhorter said. If it is socially unacceptable for whites to consider blacks as “different in any way” then it is unfair to force whites to acknowledge racial differences, he said.

Even when young people do not use the term overtly, examples of perceived microaggressions abound.

When students at Harvard performed a play this month based on a multimedia project, “I, Too, Am Harvard,” that grew out of interviews with minority students, an entire segment highlighted microaggressions.

In one scene, students recite phrases they have been told, presumably by nonblack students, including “You only got in because you’re black” and “The government feels bad for you.” In another scene, a black student dressed in a tuxedo and a red bow tie describes being at a formal university function and being confused for a waiter.

Tsega Tamene, 20, a history and science major, and a producer for the play, said microaggressions were an everyday part of student life. “It’s almost scary the way that this disguised racism can affect you, hindering your success and the very psyche of going to class,” she said.

Outside of college campuses, microaggressions have been picked apart in popular Web videos including a two-part video poking fun at things white girls say to black girls (“It’s almost like you’re not black”) and another video called “What Kind of Asian Are You?” (“Where are you from? Your English is perfect”).

But the trend has its critics. A skeptical article in the conservative National Review carried the arch headline “You Could Be a Racist and Not Even Know It.”

Harry Stein, a contributing editor to City Journal, said in an email that while most people feel unjustly treated at times, “most such supposed insults are slight or inadvertent, and even most of those that aren’t might be readily shrugged off.” Mr. Stein took issue with the term “microaggressions,” saying that its use “suggests a more serious problem: the impulse to exaggerate the meaning of such encounters in the interest of perpetually seeing oneself as a victim.”

The comments on recent articles about microaggressions have been a mix of empathetic and critical. One commenter on a BuzzFeed article on the “I, Too, Am Harvard” project wrote: “Make up your mind, do you want to be seen the same as everyone because you’re a human being, or do you want to be seen as a ‘colored’ girl, since not being seen as a ‘colored’ person is obviously offensive?” Another wrote, “I don’t get bent out of shape if a white person asks me are you, like, Hindu or something? I just correct them.”

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harvard professor and author, said the public airing of racial microaggressions should not be limited to minorities, but should be open to whites as well. “That’s the only way that you can produce a multicultural, ethnically diverse environment,” he said.

“We’re talking about people in close contact who are experiencing the painful intersections of intimacy,” he said. “The next part of that is communication, and this is a new form of communication.”