

Second Prize: Angela Ji, Stapes Senior

Ripping off the Bandaid: Microaggressions and How We Address Them

Microaggressions are a bit like finger pricks. While they do not leave as large a mess as a sword wound in the form of Jim Crow laws or Japanese internment would, they are enough to make you wince. Some people are more sensitive to finger pricks than others, but we all bandage ourselves up afterwards, ignoring the sting in our thumb.

Professor and author Derald Wing Sue describes microaggressions as everyday slights that target your identity' as a member of a marginalized group. As a Chinese-American girl who has lived in Fairfield County for her entire life, I am no stranger to them. My first introduction to microaggressions was in elementary school, where a classmate pulled the corners of his eyes back and asked me how I could possibly see if my eyes were so small. I met microaggressions again in middle school when a friend asked me about the Japanese language because "Japanese, Chinese — they're basically the same thing." I still get finger pricks from time to time. When someone seems shocked at how American my name is. When someone claims that my gender is the reason I get into STEM programs. When a stranger this past February grabbed my arm, asked me where I'm from, and refused to let go unless I say that I'm from China because "Westport" did not cut it.

I remember these moments clearly, how my emotions — confusion, frustration, disbelief, anger — spilled out as a shaky "...thanks?" "...sure?" "...cool?" I remember how I was at a loss for words, how I smiled awkwardly and just nodded. And while I cannot speak for all marginalized voices, I know that many have experience doing the exact same thing. We feel the pressure to keep quiet and move on to avoid conflict, often internalizing any feelings of invisibility that arise.

There is disagreement among researchers over the physical and psychological toll of constant exposure to microaggressions, but it is hard to deny that daily reminders of your outsider status have lasting effects. Researchers describe them as diminished self-esteem and impaired performance, to name a few. I think of them as the times I wished my hair, eyes, and skin were a different color so that nobody would question my nationality, the times I refused to bring lunch to school after someone laughed at my dumplings in kindergarten, the times I wanted absolutely nothing to do with my heritage.

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But I'd like to talk about the way we talk about microaggressions. Too often, we do not know how to address them, so we refuse to acknowledge their presence, which sends a message that one's experiences are invalid and creates an even greater gap between groups; this hinders positive discussion of topics like racial issues, gender inequalities, and religious discrimination. Our approach to those on the receiving end of microaggressions should not be "get over it" but rather "what can we do?" Simultaneously, it is futile to condemn someone for inadvertently delivering a microaggression. Nobody will ever accurately gauge the sensitivities of others or make the perfect remark, and every single one of us reading this essay, whether we want to admit it or not, has delivered microaggressions at some point.

Because, microaggressions are a complicated topic; at the barest level, they are intangible expressions arising from societal constructs that straddle the line between offense and ignorance, and they will always exist. The question should not ask how we should eliminate them from our speech, which is both impractical and impossible — how do you control words, thoughts, expressions without turning into an Orwellian dystopia? — but rather how we can react to them and lessen their impact on individuals. We need to be willing to have open discussions; for this multifaceted issue, the responsibility does not depend on one person. All of us, as recipients, initiators, and witnesses must be willing to understand the circumstances surrounding these comments, explain our perspectives, and adapt our speech.

Take the "Where are you from?" incident from February. I described the man as "racist," but perhaps "misinformed" would have been a more apt description. He grew up when the population of Asians in America was less than one percent. And, if he was from the New York area as he said, many of the Asians he came into contact with would have been immigrants rather than the second-generation. Perhaps, under friendlier circumstances, I could have explained to him that his question was flawed rather than cut him off completely, or told him why his insistence on a response containing an Asian country did not sit well with me.

And while we should not denounce people before discussing, that does not mean he is not responsible for his words; he, like many others who have also asked me this question, could have corrected himself with, "Where are your ancestors from?" upon realizing that I was not giving the desired answer. Without fully understanding the experiences of others, we need to realize that we

are bound to ask wrong questions — It • is important that we are willing to adjust our speech and learn through talking to others.

Fostering an open discourse is not just limited to individuals, however. It is crucial that administrators and teachers promote direct exposure in our education to encourage cultural awareness and tolerance in our students so that they are prepared for informed conversations in the future, especially in a school district that is 90% white. We can follow California's footsteps and advocate for policies that incorporate LGBTQ-inclusive history textbooks into our curriculum. Or, we can encourage teachers to hold classwide discussions about racism earlier on in our education — my first one was this past November in AP English Literature, many years too late.

We are far from being a spotless society, and it is going to take a multitude of ideas and trials to lessen the long-lasting impacts of inequality. We've ripped off the bandaid. Now, let's ease the throbbing in our fingers.