

Mosquito Bites Transcript

0:00-0:30

Sang Wook Nam: So, I go to SUNY Geneseo as an international student. During my school years, I heard, "You speak good English!" a lot from other people. If I'd be honest, I always felt good because that was a compliment. Years of practicing on speaking English made me help getting rid of my accent. However, this comment can actually be microaggression for some people. So, what is microaggression?

Luc Turnier: First question I wanna ask you is "Do you know what a microaggression is?"

Interviewee: Yes!

0:30-1:00

Interviewee: Yes!

Interviewee: I do!

Interviewee: I do know what microaggression is.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewee: Is someone like being passive aggressive but a little more "aggressive aggressive"?

LT: Do you know what a microaggression is?

Interviewee: I heard what it is. I am just not exactly sure.

LT: Do you know what a microaggression is?

Interviewee: Isn't a microaggression when people say things but they don't realize that it is sort of like aggressive, I guess and then... no then [grinning].

1:00-1:30

LT: How would you define a microaggression?

Interviewee: A microaggression is basically an uninformed statement regarding someone's cultural identity, usually cultural identity of course. It could just be any sort of less represented group.

Interviewee: My definition of a microaggression is an action or interaction you might have with someone, whether you even mean it or not, so intentional or unintentional, that takes aim at their minority membership. So, to be like something you say or something you do or just like anything like that, that really insults someone almost.

1:30-2:00

Interviewee: Okay, so my definition is when like there's like tension or like racial tension between certain groups of people on like the campus or some places like that.

Interviewee: A microaggression is I would say subtle hints at racism that comes up in conversation.

SWN: According to NAFSA, micro-aggression is defined as subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or another non-minority dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.

2:00-2:30

SWN: So, I guess everyone seems to somewhat know what microaggression is. Then, let's ask them what comment is microaggression and which one is not.

LT: So, I'm gonna ask you a few questions and you're gonna tell me whether or not you think these are microaggressive phrases.

LT: First one I wanna ask you is, if someone says "Oh, they all look the same."

LT: Would you consider that as microaggression?

Interviewee: I'd consider that as microaggression. Yeah!

LT: Why?

Interviewee: That's like an outright aggression.

LT: (Laughs)

2:30-3:00

Interviewee: Yes!

LT: And why would you consider it as microaggression?

Interviewee: Because it is targeting a race of Asians.

Interviewee: Yes and no in the fact that I've actually heard that phrase geared towards me and as well as [I've] said it myself.

LT: If I was in the South Bronx, right?

Interviewee: Okay.

LT: I see all of these Black people and I'm like "Wow, all of you guys look alike!" Is that a microaggression?

Interviewee: (Sighs) Is that a microaggression? (Sighs)

3:00-3:30

Interviewee: Yeah! Yeah, it is because you are literally taking aim at a group of Black people and you know making like this generalization that they all look alike.

LT: And it doesn't matter what race it is like White, Asian...

Interviewee: Yeah it doesn't... they could be anything. And for the record, it doesn't matter what you are either. It's still... you know, insulting to that demographic.

Interviewee: Definitely, One hundred. One hundred percent!

LT: Why?

Interviewee: Because you are targeting a certain type of people compared to you people which is just could be anybody but if you are just going deeper than that, that's just racially targeting.

3:30-4:00

SWN: First question seems like they all have similar opinions about it. Now, let me ask questions that could be a little vague.

LT: You were to ask or if someone was to ask someone, "Where were you born? Where were you born?"

Interviewee: I don't think that's a big deal.

Interviewee: Uh, that's not a microaggression because you wanna know the context about your friend, like their background and stuff like that, without being intrusive because... without assuming and making generalizations about your friend of where they are from.

4:00-4:30

Interviewee: Yeah that is a microaggression because then again, you are assuming that I am "other". You are assuming because of the color of my skin, or because the way that I speak, or whatever type of like cultural symbol that you are looking at to otherize me... you're doing it.

SWN: Now lemme try even more a vague one.

LT: Let's say you're working at Tokyo, and you're at work. You open your lunch box and your coworker looks and says "Ew! What's that?" Is that considered as a microaggression?

Interviewee: What's in my lunch box?

LT: Tuna fish, egg sandwich or something like that.

Interviewee: That's pretty freaking White!

(Laughs)

4:30-5:00

Interviewee: Um, I don't even know. I feel like coming from a place of White privilege, there's very little microaggression to be had against us because we are not an oppressed people. I don't know. I feel like microaggression definitely has to be... it ties into oppressed and oppressor relationship historically. So, just with White people being stereotyped and criticized, I don't view it as outright aggressive even if it is a bit stereotypical.

5:00-5:30

Interviewee: I think “yeah” especially because like the term is “microaggression,” so it can be done in small ways and like food isn’t something small but it seems like an everyday scenario so I would say “yeah.”

Interviewee: Yeah, you’re just being ignorant like, be open to other foods, yeah. Definitely being microaggressive.

Interviewee: I’m gonna give that a “No.” I don’t think that is. I think maybe [they] just don’t understand the culture. I...I wouldn’t (sighs)...I would say that’s more of you’re coming from a place of like a deepness of understanding.

5:30-6:00

Interviewee: Yes. Not only is it kind of attacking me as a person, but it also attacking my culture especially if it’s something that my family would traditionally cook. I had that done to me actually when I had eaten a sandwich that...while a sandwich is pretty like “American” so to speak, it had, like, Chinese ingredients in it and so I have had that reaction before. So, yeah it could be seen as a microaggression.

6:00-6:30

SWN: So, why is this happening? Why are people defining microaggression very similar but choosing it differently? How do we define what is microaggression and what is not? Does microaggression even exist?

Lee Pierce: Microaggressions definitely exist. I see them all the time in the classroom. I see them in culture. I hear students and other people complain about them, or report them, and sometimes I hear people describe things that happen to them that they don’t even know that are microaggressions. But, I can see that they are.

6:30-7:00

SWN: So, is microaggression problematic just in the U.S.?

LP: I actually don’t know. It’s definitely a problem in the U.S. I haven’t lived in other countries for very long but definitely it seems to be to a problem anytime in a country that there is multiple ethnic groups competing or racial groups. So, in the U.S., obviously, you see it a lot with Black and White Americans. But you see it, for example, in Russia and in the Ukraine. So you see it in Asian countries and some of the smaller islands. So, anytime you have different groups vying for power, you’re gonna see microaggressions happening because it is a way that the dominant group can maintain its superiority without looking like it’s being repressive.

7:00-7:30

SWN: So, I invited three students to hear their experience in microaggression in the U.S. They are all Asian and have the same major, but have different status in the U.S. I wanted to hear their experience in microaggression in the U.S. to figure out if they should take it seriously about this issue.

SWN: First, Sharon is Chinese who came over to U.S. and plays the piano.

7:30-8:00

Sharon Chen: I mean personally I do not experience that many microaggression. I feel like I... to be honest I never actually experience racism, for me personally. And, also I think microaggression is really depends on your personal experiences. For me like, my cousin she [was] born there and grow up there. So, basically American- born Chinese and she told me that [she] has faced actually aggression in the subway that people like did insult her because of her race.

8:00-8:30

SC: And I think that is probably like more than a microaggression somehow. I mean also, maybe minor microaggression for her is just like, "Oh, you're speaking good English," or just like that would be considered as microaggression, for me not really because I know that I am [an] immigrant. So, I am originally not...I don't get offended when people asked me where I am from and I am speaking good English.

8:30-9:00

SC: It doesn't really matter to me.

SWN: Eric is a Chinese American is born in the U.S. and plays cello.

Eric Wang: I've definitely experienced it a few times during my life. Not very often, because I generally surround myself with people that aren't the types to micro-aggress other people. So, generally not every much surprisingly.

9:00-9:30

EW: Like from what I hear of many minority groups that either immigrated here or were raised here, I've heard stories that they have gone through a lot of microaggressions and I'm just here thinking that "I can't just say that I've shared the same experiences as they have." And in all honesty, I'm glad that is the case because nobody wants to go through these little remarks.

9:30-10:00

SWN: As a U.S. citizen, do you think that they tend to experience microaggressions less compared to international students or first-generation immigrants?

EW: Hmm...That depends but I wouldn't exactly say so immigrants that were born here could easily experience the same amount due to prejudices that exist against minority groups that they are associated with. So, they could experience just the same amount of microaggressions or like prejudices that like someone that's not from America would experience if they were to immigrate here.

10:00-10:30

SWN: Tara is a Japanese student who was born and raised in Japan [and] plays the piano.

Tara Menon: So, I am unfortunately I think I've experienced more microaggression with Japanese international students than I have with local students. I think it was my freshman year or sophomore year, I was basically at the club expo. So, there is a Japanese culture club like station and right next to it, there was I think like a Muslim organization or something of that sort.

10:30-11:00

TM: I was going to the Japanese culture club because I have friends there and I knew the people who were at that station, I'd thought I would just come by and say, "Hi" because I am in the Union. One of the students in Japanese said, "Wait Tara, are you supposed to be there, not here?" Like I found that very offensive. I'm not sure but being a biracial [person], I've always had like identity issues, culturally especially. I felt like wherever I go, I just never belong because like in Japan, I'm considered as foreign and in India, I'm considered foreign.

11:00-11:30

TM: And here I am an international student who can magically speak English and that also just made me more insecure about who I was and with the same students that I've experienced more microaggression. When I talked in Japanese they're like, "Wait, what's your first language?" and I said, "Japanese," and they're like, "Well, what's up with your accent?"

11:30-12:00

TM: And they kept like poking at my accent that I have when I speak Japanese and... (tears forming) I'm sorry. So, I only had like proper Japanese like education in my Kindergarten year. So, it's really hard for me to speak as fluently in Japanese than in my English. So, um, I've always been insecure about that but I try like over the summer, I read a lot of Japanese books, and I've always tried to like maintain my Japanese skills.

12:00-12:30

TM: Although I start forgetting it easily because of like it's just easier for me to speak in English, and I interact with English speaking people in my daily life. It's just like much easier for me to speak in English, especially because my parents both know and understand English.

SWN: So, even if one person out of ten people say that certain comment can be microaggression. Is it still microaggression?

LP: It depends on who is making the comment. So, for example, I don't think that people with white privilege or straight privilege can experience microaggressions.

12:30-13:00

LP: So, if one out of every ten straight people say that they are experiencing a microaggression, I'm probably not going to agree with them if it's a microaggression about their sexuality. Obviously, straight people can experience other kinds of microaggression, right if you are a straight Black man. But yeah, if you are a minority and you say that you experienced a microaggression, I think it's fair to say that other people are experiencing it as well. So, even though one out of ten people may say that they experienced it, there's probably many others out of that ten that have experienced it and don't know that they have experienced it.

13:00-13:30

SWN: We know that microaggression can hurt people's feelings but can microaggression can actually give huge impact on minority society?

LP: Yeah and I think that one of the things that people realize when they study microaggressions is that it's not really... people's feelings do matter. I mean obviously one of the things you want to do is try to not hurt people's feelings. But, also a society in which microaggressions goes unchecked tends to be a highly dysfunctional society.

13:30-14:00

LP: So, collectively whether or not people's hurt or whose feelings are hurt, we are all worse off when we act micro-aggressively toward people. And the example that I always give is that if you're in a relationship with a partner and they are afraid of conflict, so everytime you leave a dish in the sink, they go, "Uhhh, I guess I'll do the dishes again," or a couple weeks go by and you forget to put gas in the car and they say, "Uhhh, I guess I'll just put gas in the car." Even if you two never had a conflict so your relationship seems good, those little tiny slights over time really do structural damage to your ability to get along.

14:00-14:30

SWN: So, what do we need to do in order to prevent micro-aggression?

LP: I like to tell my students about the flip it test, and so, that's the test of well if you wouldn't do it for the opposite, don't do it for this person. So, for example, if you are White would you ask another White person, "Where they are from?" as in ethnically? I mean nobody ever asks me like, "Oh what country are your parents from?"

14:30-15:00

LP: So, if you wouldn't ask me that, then don't ask, and if you flip it right, don't ask a person of color where they are from. Or, if you want to ask a person of color make sure you are asking it to other people. Likewise, if you see a person rolling down the hill in a wheelchair and you see a person next to them walking and you're trying to point them out to a friend, you wouldn't point to the walking person and say, "Oh, you see the person walking?" But you would point to the person in the wheelchair and say, "Oh, you see the person in the wheelchair?" So again, if you're gonna do it for one group, flip it and you should never do for one group for what you wouldn't do for another.

15:00-15:30

SWN: As you can see, microaggression does exist. It's not very hard to put some thought into the biases you might hold; become curious about the way your words and actions are perceived by others. Listen, when people explain why certain remarks offend them and make it a habit. Stop for a bit and think before you speak especially when you're [wading] in on someone's identity.

15:30-16:00

LT: And how do you think we can stop microaggressions?

Interviewee: Um, I think if people think more before they speak.

Interviewee: Um, microaggressions only end when people educate themselves

Interviewee: Just like self-research. You should be able to conduct your own kind of research online.

Interviewee: Just be aware of what you say. You know, just don't say whatever comes out of your mouth.

Interviewee: I feel people should be educated on what they can and cannot like say at certain instances in order to eliminate microaggressions.

Interviewee: Well, I mean a lot of it is just, like, education. You know, a lot of...like for the food example that you gave, a lot of people just don't know other cultures' food.

16:00-16:30

Interviewee: And, and just you know, where they come from and why life is so different on the other side of the world for example. So, I feel like if we take more time especially to international students, I feel like there is such a good place for us to start, at least at Geneseo. We can learn so much from them because they come from literally all over the planet and they live entirely a different life than what life is like here for people from Western New York, you know?