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## Hard Work Through Heart Work: Life Lessons Learned through My Lens of Microaggressions

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## **Hard Work Through Heart Work: Life Lessons Learned Through My Lens of Microaggressions**

*Sean E. Harness, Michigan State University*

*“Good, better, best, never let it rest, until your good is better and your better is best.”*  
(Author Unknown)

This quote resonates with me because it truly embodies the life lessons that were passed down to me at a very young age. My mother was adamant about teaching me the significance of hard-work, consistency, and accountability. I grew up within inner-city Detroit, Michigan as a poor African American male in a single parent household. Something that was known in my community was that while some inner-city Detroit children graduate from high school and have the opportunity to go to college, they rarely would matriculate with a degree. According to recent data from Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information (2021), 73% of the region’s high school graduates enroll in college within a year of graduating; however, just 35% of those graduates earn a degree or credential within six years.

I began my life as one of the statistics we’ve all read about, the “poor Black kid” in an urban environment who aspired to live a much better life. No one in my immediate family went to college. After college, one typically secured an opportunity for employment that offered more financial stability for the family. My mother struggled financially to raise me. At times she would work two jobs or go to night school to make ends meet. This offered her a chance to not only pay her bills but also to enroll me into more extra-curricular activities. These activities were great investments and were

part of the magic formula that made me the successful man I am today.

Most of the activities my mother exposed me to gave me a new and vast perspective. I learned to be polite, remain inquisitive, and always keep an open mind. My field trip experience was much different than that of my friends. For example, a common field trip for them consisted of a short walk up the block for ice cream. My field trips had much more depth that offered unique educational experiences one could not obtain by just attending a local ice cream parlor. My friends were impressed that I had the chance to go snow skiing, camping, and horseback riding. In high school I was a member of the National Honor Society and varsity baseball team. In addition, I earned straight As in my honors math courses and developed great friendships with several classmates. My support system often reminded me that my voice was important and to always hold my head high because I was just as accomplished as all the other students in my class, no matter the race or status. For this reason, I had the strong assumption that everyone in life began on the same level playing field.

The teenage chapter of my life was cake and ice cream compared to the challenges I encountered while attending college. Black peers from inner city Detroit with whom I grew up were few and far between on my college campus. The culture shock I experienced was intense. No one told me that my college classes would be comprised of so many people who were so different from one another in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. This was also where I was exposed to more direct and indirect levels of microaggressions in my everyday interactions with students on campus.

Microaggression was not a term I was taught in school, so it was not familiar to

me. However, I was aware of certain situations that caused me unfamiliar levels of anxiety and self-doubt. Sue et al. (2007) asserted that not only do microaggressions exist, but they can be directly correlated to verbal, behavioral, and environmental intentional and unintentional forms of discrimination. More specifically, microaggressions are brief, everyday expressions that send negative messages to people of color because they belong to a specific racial minority group. Additionally, Sue et al. (2007) explained that microaggressions can be categorized in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Microassaults, which are the most easily recognized, have been characterized as “old-fashioned” racism. This form is more deliberate, known for humiliating a victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or hurtful discriminatory actions. Although less easily detectable, microinsults can be represented through faint punchy aggressive behavior. The “aggressor” typically struggles to recognize the wrongness in their behavior; however, there is a hidden message that is quite insulting and detectable to the person of color. Microinvalidations are behaviors that exclude, negate, or disregard the thoughts and feelings that the person of color experiences on a day-to-day basis. For example, people often say, “I don’t see color, I just see you as a normal human-being”.

The first few years on a college campus were mostly positive. I made new friends, developed new hobbies, and learned to develop much better study habits. Honestly, I was uncontrollably happy much of the time because I was the representative from my hometown and family who was chosen to make a different life for myself. These feelings are important to mention because I was the student who avoided conflict at all

costs. I was on a mission to graduate, and I wasn’t going to let anyone stand in the way of that. I could then at least be one person who broke the cycle of poverty that often ensued with people from the urban inner city who got “caught-up” with those elements of life that didn’t develop into anything fruitful. Although I had a good spirit much of the time, I soon learned that in some situations, people presented a “not so great” version of their thought processes, and in some instances, this was sprinkled with microaggressions. Having been a first-generation college graduate, I was quite confused when these situations occurred because I didn’t have any mentors to teach me how to work through these types of conflict.

I completed my undergraduate degree in engineering from Michigan State University. I enjoyed working as an engineer and finally had a chance to put my theoretical knowledge into practice. Most of my leisure time was spent with my African American friends instead of my coworkers, who were mostly non-black. I didn’t have a very culturally diverse friend group; therefore, my experiences with other cultures were quite limited. Seven years later I decided to attend graduate school to obtain my master’s in business administration, also at Michigan State. In a fulltime MBA program, individuals often spend more time personally and professionally with students of various races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses. While attaining these levels of education, I found myself upset, anxious, and often alone with insults hurled from those around me. According to Burt et al. (2020), as a result of such confrontations, some students may feel obligated to validate their intellectual competence in the classroom and affirm their rightful position in their courses and institution. I later learned those feelings I

had were not invalid, and those insults were microaggressions.

The situations described below are two negative instances where I experienced microaggressions with my fellow business school group members. Both situations were difficult; however, they provided me with skills and life lessons that have followed me well into my current career. Names used are pseudonyms.

## Two Lessons in Microaggressions

### *Experience 1: The Black Invisible Man*

In my first semester at business school, all of the students were strategically split into culturally diverse groups in one of our finance courses. Our group was tasked with completing a project which included working together to develop a unique financial model. We split up the work and decided to meet later to have a collective discussion regarding each member's portion of the project. When we had this meeting and it was my turn to speak, one of my group members (John) rudely cut me off and totally ignored all the hard work I had done.

I didn't understand the feelings I had while sitting there, but this behavior seemed to be beyond rude. John heard me speaking but instead treated me like I was invisible when it was my turn to speak. How dare he not let me finish my sentence? I stayed up all night working on that finance assignment with very little sleep. For fear of saying something to further escalate the situation, I didn't mention my true feelings to this group member or anyone else for that matter. The lessons I learned early in life seemed to no longer apply. It didn't seem to matter how hard I worked, or if I had studied to show myself approved. I felt as if John and the other group members think we were on a "level" playing field. It appeared in those

moments that John felt he was superior to me.

This made me realize that perhaps he and the other group members considered me an outsider. I hadn't grown up in neighborhoods of white picket fences and flowerbeds. For the first time in my life, I acknowledged that I felt less than, a bit defeated, and undervalued. I didn't feel worthy. Meanwhile, I felt like it was just a "walk in the park" for my group. The stereotypes of African Americans must have been real for them. In a study by Johnson-Ahorlu (2013), African American students experienced racial stereotypes, which were presented to them as attacks on their academic capabilities. Many of the "attacks" included shock from faculty and peers when they achieved in the classroom and inquiries about their abilities to handle the course workload. Were they blind to their behavior and how they made me feel? Or did they believe I, too, felt I was less than?

This situation was embarrassing; however, I was also quite ignorant to the reasons why I felt the way I did at the time. My group member never apologized, and his ignorant behavior was swept under the rug. I also was hurt by the silence of my other group members, which made me feel as if they supported him and his rudeness and were complicit in his behavior. This felt like blatant racism. However, the article by Johnson-Ahorlu (2013) categorized this situation as a microassault. Although there wasn't any overt name calling, there was definitely some avoidant behaviors displayed by my classmates.

The saving grace in this situation was my knowledge of who and what I was. I was shaken, but not completely stirred. I was the kid who "made it," according to my family and others who loved me, more specifically in Detroit. I was just as worthy as my peers and had the same seat at the table that they

did. Like them, I applied and was admitted into the same high-level program, and I was there to stay.

### ***Experience 2: A Slice of Humble Pie***

I decided I would approach my second semester a bit differently. I would no longer remain silent when someone behaved in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. One day during the new semester, I decided to have lunch with one of my groupmates (Tim) from the finance class from the previous semester. While having lunch with Tim, we had a chance to get to know one another better. We spoke about our backgrounds, education, and hobbies. Midway through the conversation, Tim brought up the exchange I had with John. I reminded Tim how rudely John ignored me when it was my turn to present and explain my analysis. Tim hesitantly denied my accusations and made a statement that was even more disturbing. Tim said, "I wouldn't say John ignored you. We were just truly pressed for time." He also asked if I was actually grasping the concepts in the class at the time.

My first thought was to think about my interaction in the classroom. Had I given either of these team members any reason to assume I couldn't keep up? No! As a matter of fact, I was one of the sharpest students in the class and quite often would teach other students how to complete assignments correctly. I quickly revisited an early lesson I learned in my household about accountability. If someone did something wrong, I was taught to hold them accountable for their actions. This time, I confronted Tim and confidently let him know I absolutely understood the lesson. I further reminded him that I was most often recognized as one of the best students in the

class; however, my individual group just never gave me a chance.

Later in the week I took some time to reflect. When recalling the experience I had with both Tim and John, I didn't understand why they were not empathic to how they treated me. I felt sad but also very upset. I had never been in a situation where I knowingly allowed someone to make me feel that way.

The scenario was very humbling. The comments made by Tim could be defined as a microinsult as outlined in the article by Sue et al. (2007). Tim didn't feel that he did anything wrong, and he downplayed my statements and communicated I had no real reason to feel upset. I was clearly hurt by the situation; however, no one attempted to genuinely understand why.

The lessons I learned from this situation extended my global view. I learned that just because you hold someone accountable for hurtful things they say, express, or do does not mean they will take responsibility for their actions. In fact, I learned that sharing a concern could even cause the other party to feel threatened, offended, and disheartened. I was hurt, but I also realized that I wasn't overreacting, that my experience was my own and shouldn't have been simply brushed aside.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Although many elements of these stories were hurtful to me, there were also many powerful life lessons. These situations taught me to stay alert and to be prepared to speak up early and often. Most of all, I knew that I should never be ashamed of where I come from.

Often, we focus on the success of our peers; however, we forget to acknowledge our own struggles to reach those accomplishments. Going through life as a

minority, and in my case, as a Black man, I still need to perform 10 times better than the status quo. The journey can be uncomfortable; however, we must be diligent about hard work, consistency, and holding others accountable for their actions.

In conclusion, I've learned that no matter how many ways one explains certain feelings, thoughts, emotions, or factual accounts of situations, many people that come from a different environment or background will not recognize or validate that view. Although my classmates and I all worked diligently to be admitted into the same graduate program, we did not matriculate on a level playing field. As explained in the research by Johnson-Ahorlu (2013), as an African American I struggled with racial stereotypes in addition to course workload. Although I learned the importance of hard-work, determination, and perseverance from my childhood, this could not erase the common negative exchanges I experienced from my colleagues while attending the university. These were not just my feelings anymore; in fact, these were the microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations explained by Sue et al. (2007). Now that I understand this and the true intent behind microaggressions, I navigate differently and use these situations as teachable moments.

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