MICROAGGRESSION

Dealing with the "every-day"

This flyer was developed for the purposes of the WHPC and EPCC ARCHER BOF at ISC'18 entitled: "Retaining the advantage of a diverse HPC workforce: How to deal with Microaggression".

WHPC
WOMEN IN HIGH
PERFORMANCE
COMPUTING

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.
- Professor Derald Wing Sue, Columbia University.

What is microaggression?
Microaggression is a relatively new term that has been developed to describe the every-day casual degradation of any socially marginalized group. These exchanges, often below the awareness of many in any situation, are not deliberate acts of bias or aggression, and are often perpetuated in situations where the 'giver' does not intend offense and is unaware that they are causing harm.

What about microinequities?
Micro inequalities or 'microinequities' is a slight that demeans or marginalizes the recipient, whereas microaggression is an act that stereotypes or denigrates the recipients. There is a lot of overlap between the two definitions, but generally speaking microinequities occur irrespective of a person's membership of a particular stereotyped group, whereas microaggression is linked directly to an individual's membership of a marginalized group (for example women in computing).

Impact on the workforce
'Micro-behaviours' (both **microaggression** and **microinequities**) can result in:
- Discouragement
- Sense of not belonging
- Unhappiness.
- Erosion of commitment and loyalty first to a person, then a group, organization and potentially an entire sector.

They are a likely cause for why such a high proportion of women leave computing by the mid-point in their careers compared to their male

Feeling like you belong

Much of the research on careers and retention of the workforce, including when groups decide to leave a sector, focus on the 'fit' of a person and the workplace environment. For example, researchers in this area often report findings that an individual's perception of 'fit' depends on having a similar personality, background, education etc., to those in the community. While this area of research is relatively new and still evolving, it is clear that to attract and retain an increasingly diverse workforce in High Performance Computing, everyone must make an effort to allow under-represented groups to feel like they 'fit'.

Examples of detrimental comments

It is often difficult to recognise detrimental comments, particularly in ourselves. The following are examples, that can have a detrimental impact on a group.

- A White man checks their wallet as a Black man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.).
- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking "good English." (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A female manager is labeled as a "difficult," while her male counterpart is described as "assertive" when displaying the same characteristics (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female medical doctor wearing a stethoscope is mistaken as a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should not be doctors. Women are less capable than men).
- Comments and whistles on women walking down the street. (Hidden message: Your appearance is for the enjoyment of men.)
- Using the term "gay" to describe a movie that you didn't like. (Hidden message: Being gay is associated with negative and undesirable characteristics.)

Are we just being overly sensitive?

Many people often wonder if we are all being too cautious, overly 'PC', sensitive or looking for something to get offended about. While it is important that we acknowledged each other's differences, part of the problem stems from when these behaviours come from people in a position of privilege and who are not exposed to constant microaggressions themselves.

The concept 'death by 1000 paper cuts' is often used to describe the accumulative effect of constantly feeling that one does not belong, one's differences and/or inferior position in a group.

A 2010[1] study found African-American women show signs of accelerated biological ageing when compared with white women which the researchers attribute to repeated or prolonged subjective and objective stressors (i.e everyday racism and microaggressions). The study found that black women are 7.5 years biologically "older" than white women because of extreme stress.

[1]Geronimus, Arline T. et al. "Do US Black Women Experience Stress-Related Accelerated Biological Aging?: A Novel Theory and First Population-Based Test of Black-White Differences in Telomere Length." Human nature (Hawthorne, N.Y.) 21.1 (2010): 19–38. PMC. Web. 13 June 2018.

PREVENTING MICROAGGRESSION

Check yourself:

Ask yourself: *"Would I say (whatever I am about to say) to a straight, white, cis, able-bodied, non-fat, non-jewish, non-muslim, english-speaking man (or any other majority characteristic)?"*. If the answer is no, then what you are about to say is probably a microaggression.

Be open to criticism from others. Challenge your idea of your "good" and "ethical" self.

Check others:

Be prepared to educate - most of us have no idea that we are contributing to microaggression. Share this information, and explain to others the potential harm they might be causing. Be an advocate for others: it is often