

# A Crash Course on Micro-aggressions

By **Pia de Jong** - November 7, 2018



*Illustration by Eliane Gerrits*

There is a fast-growing inequality in American life — in political correctness and its consequences. You can see the fault lines most clearly between generations. The baby boomers and older people are acting and talking the free-wheeling, damn-the-torpedoes way they always did. Politicians routinely resort to

offensive language, the president ridicules the appearance of women, and the government itself tries to reverse LGBT emancipation. Younger people like millennials, on the other hand, are becoming more and more finely sensitive to offensive statements, and never mind how small or unintended. This subject is central to the curriculum taught to students on every high school and college campus.

Last week I greeted one of my daughter's Latina friends from across the street. "Hi, Louisa," I called. My daughter turned to me in shock. It was not Louisa, but Mariana, another Latina girl. "Mom," she protested. "That is one of your typical micro-aggressions. You give the impression that you think all Latinas are the same."

I did not deliberately intend to insult the girlfriend by confusing her with someone else of the same ethnicity, but of course it was too late. I did not get away with saying that their hairstyles were very similar. No, I was unintentionally a racist.

It was time for my daughter to give me a crash course from her school curriculum about "micro-aggressions." They are everyday verbal and non-verbal expressions that consciously or unconsciously show hostility or contempt for members of a

marginalized group. Think of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. By unconsciously insulting one member, you insult the whole group that person belongs to – and demonstrate that you are oblivious to the human nature of the group.

Micro-aggressions can be an eye-opener, especially for those accustomed to “white privilege,” a term that my daughter also patiently explains to me. In order not to give offense, however subtly, you have to be acutely aware of your own ingrained way of looking, thinking, and doing. And that is not easy.

So do not pull your handbag closer to your body when a group of black guys enters the store. Do not misspell or mispronounce the name of someone from, say, Poland or Taiwan – or God forbid the Netherlands. Do not assume that someone who “looks Asian” always comes from China or Japan. There are so many more Asian countries, as well as those people born here. Do not ask where someone actually comes from, just because he or she is not white. Americans from Ghana or India can go back many generations. You cannot make assumptions based on the color of a person’s skin.

My daughter is not yet finished with me. Do not check your e-mail when you are eating with someone. If you are in a large group, do not make eye contact with only a few of them. Do not ignore someone in a wheelchair, but ask a question to the person pushing the wheelchair. Do not assume that the woman in the medical gown is the nurse and not the doctor. Do not show up on Halloween dressed as an American Indian or a cowboy.

Meanwhile, it is quite confusing to live in a country that demonstrates such a double standard. Because a glance at the television or the newspaper shows how all these rules are violated matter-of-factly in the public sphere. While one half of the country is busily trying to classify micro-aggressions of which many of us are unaware, the other half has elevated macro-aggression to an art. It’s as if the country has landed in a collective midlife crisis, where many older people are suddenly

behaving like adolescents.

Can we not send all those privileged adults back to school for a refresher course?

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