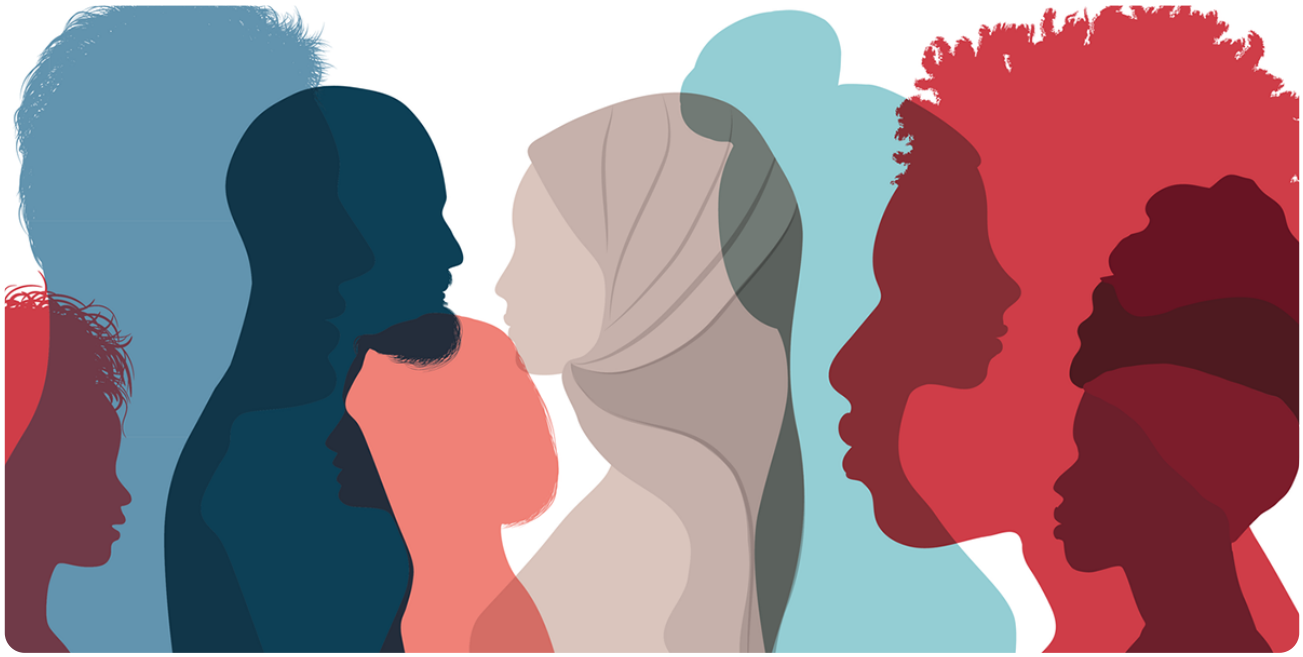
Science Societies

Sometimes, it's the little things—Understanding microaggressions

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Source: Adobe Stock/melita.

I am at an out-of-town meeting and here it comes, like clockwork, an interaction that has been repeated more times than I can count. It starts with the question, “So, do you have kids?”

I reply, “Yes, I have three.”

The response: “Oh, you don’t look like someone who has three kids. Who’s watching them while you’re here? Don’t you miss them?”

On the surface, this response might seem innocuous, even complimentary. I guess that I don’t look as exhausted as I feel some days. However, comments like these make a couple of assumptions. First, that a mother should “look” a certain way; second, her role is that of the primary caregiver, and that role is compromised by being away on business.

This is an example of a microaggression, defined as the common, subtly prejudiced words and actions that marginalized populations experience in their day-to-day interactions. These may be targeted towards people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, and/or ability. Unlike overt acts of discrimination, microaggressions are subtle and can be hard to spot. The individual act is often slight and seemingly unintentional. However, the weight of those incidents accumulates. For individuals who fall into more than one marginalized group, this effect compounds. Microaggressions have been likened to death by a thousand cuts. These acts, when repeated over time by numerous individuals, contribute to a culture that reiterates a message of exclusion. Sustaining a diverse workforce requires developing an organizational culture in which individuals feel welcome and valued for the unique

perspective, talent, and expertise they contribute to the organization. Microaggressions, while seemingly small and innocuous, detract from that culture. Below are actions we can take to reduce or eliminate microaggressions from our personal and professional interactions.

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Acknowledge: The first step in addressing the challenge of microaggressions is acknowledging that we are all susceptible to implicit bias. We are human, and our past experiences shape our assumptions. Examining our potential biases can help us to be more vigilant and proactive in managing how those perceptions influence our interactions with others.

Expand: Our perceptions are built on our experiences or, where we lack experience, on portrayals through media. Any good scientist knows that sample size is important! One way to reduce implicit biases is by diversifying the individuals we interact with or observe on a regular basis.

Listen: Because microaggressions are not overt, they are often overlooked by those outside of the marginalized groups they target. We can never truly walk a mile in someone else's shoes; however, listening to the experiences of others can open our eyes to obstacles that were invisible from our vantage. Check your organization for

opportunities to interact and learn from those who may have a different perspective from your own. A simple web search for examples of microaggressions can also help you recognize situations that might have otherwise passed under your radar.

Support: Talking about microaggressions is difficult because they are not overt and they are often said by good people who do not say them with an intent to offend. However, the cumulative effect of being told repeatedly, in small ways, "you do not belong here," is detrimental to building teams and organizations that benefit from the input of diverse individuals. If you witness or are subjected to microaggressions, I encourage you to speak up. Standing up to bias is not easy, though, particularly for the one on which the bias is perpetrated or for those in positions of less power. Because of this, it is especially important for those who are in positions of power to learn to recognize and act to reduce microaggressions. By doing so, we can create a culture that allows diversity to thrive.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit **www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science**, **www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science**, and **www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science**.

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