



ORGANIZATIONS
IN SOLIDARITY

OPAQUE AND PERVERSIVE: MICROAGGRESSIONS IN PEACE AND SECURITY

JUNE 2023






TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>ABOUT</u>	P. 1
<u>FORWARD</u>	P. 3
<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>	P. 4
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	P. 6
<u>SURVEY DESIGN</u>	P. 7
<u>PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN</u>	P. 11
<u>SURVEY RESULTS AT A GLANCE</u>	P. 14
<u>NARRATIVE RESPONSES</u>	P. 17
<u>Q1: DEFINE MICROAGGRESSIONS</u>	P. 18
<u>Q2: SHARE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE</u>	P. 20
<u>Q3: MICROAGGRESSION IMPACT CAREERS</u>	P. 22
<u>Q4: CHANGES TO THE SYSTEMS</u>	P. 24
<u>Q5: COMMONLY USED WORDS</u>	P. 27
<u>Q6: SPACES, TEXTS, AND PLACES</u>	P. 29
<u>NEXT STEPS</u>	P. 34
<u>RESOURCES</u>	P. 40

ABOUT

At **Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (WCAPS)**, we believe global issues demand a variety of perspectives. That's why we created a platform devoted to women of color that cultivates a strong voice and network for its members while encouraging dialogue and strategies for engaging in policy discussions on an international scale. Through our dedication to mentorship and partnerships and our passion for changing the global community landscape, we remain committed to achieving our vision of advancing the leadership and professional development of women of color in the fields of international peace, security, and conflict transformation.

The **Organizations in Solidarity (OIS)** program at WCAPS works collaboratively with organizations and individuals across the peace, security and foreign policy field to combat racist beliefs, attitudes, and acts of discrimination, and to integrate diversity within all levels of our organizations and field. We are evaluating the current state of affairs, educating, elevating and supporting diverse voices and perspectives and the individuals who hold them, giving due recognition and credit to the achievements of Black people and people of color, and creating a world where all people are treated fairly, equitably, and with respect.

We provide thoughtful collection and analysis of data collected that capture demographics who experience microaggressions the most, identify specific spaces microaggressions occur, and the impact that they have on people of color and marginalized groups working in peace and security professions and gather actionable insights from emerging and established experts from diverse backgrounds.



ABOUT

The Working Group

The **Microaggressions and Workplace working group** is committed to acknowledging microaggressions and their detrimental impact on Black people and people of color in the workplace. We bring the topic of microaggressions to the floor and to the consciousness of both small and large organizations in order to start a dialogue and validate the feelings of people of color but not to insist they do the heavy lifting of the dialogue. This begins with giving language to educate staff and educating white folks about the history behind and impact of microaggressions to change their behavior/language.

The Author



Karla Mastracchio, Ph.D. is the Professor of Informational Advantage and Strategic Influence at Joint Special Operations University and an award-winning communication strategist. Respected communication and innovation strategist with over 17 years of supporting the Department of Defense, startups, higher education, and non-profit organizations. She lives on the island of Oahu with her family and is an avid true crime enthusiast.

Gratitude

The contributions from all our participants, including WCAPS' and OiS' members, to this project are invaluable. Your responses offer incredible insight and have helped advance knowledge. We would also like to extend our deepest thanks to the WCAPS staff, especially Maher Akremi and Tamera Allen, and the OiS Microaggressions Working Group, particularly Edith Kardouni, Chelsey Jones, and Kelly Pengelly. Your concepts, feedback, and expertise were extremely helpful.

The publication designer: Grace Y. Choi, Ph.D.

FORWARD

This is the final report of a multi-year project that analyzes microaggressions in language used across peace and security communities of practice. Our intent is to understand their strategic impact in those professional settings.

This project would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions across the WCAPS staff who graciously provided their time and professional expertise to further these discussions. We wish to also extend sincere thanks to each member of the WCAPS community and the wider peace and security field who participated and gave thoughtful feedback.

Words matter and the linguistic and performative choices we make in our everyday lives impact not only our ability to maneuver in professional spaces but also affect the way we collectively communicate on a much larger scale. This report can help organizations and individuals across the peace and security field create actionable responses to these intentional or unintentional subtle acts of exclusion that have persisted for centuries. We not only understand how microaggressions impact individuals at the interpersonal level, but we also acknowledge how they negatively impact systems and organizations and make international and cross-cultural collaboration more difficult, and our world less safe. We understand that this is a small step in a larger conversation.

"Some racism is so subtle that neither victim nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on—which may be especially toxic for people of color."

- Bestselling author Derald Wing Sue

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a summary of a single survey and its key findings. Our approach includes important data and trends that directly impact our WCAPS members, people of color, and historically marginalized populations. This gives us valuable insights about how and when microaggressions occur, and be able to use mitigation efforts in future planning.

This project explores ways language and nonverbal communication can impact individuals and organizations. It examines opportunities to understand ways microaggressions serve to further structural inequalities, and develops next steps to realize the opportunities for social and organizational changes around these challenges. The following report is grounded on survey data including quantitative and long form answers to a series of questions and prompts surrounding microaggressions which are highlighted to describe the experiences respondents have had with microaggressions in professional settings. We also provide examples of how participants handle incidents of microaggressions, and share initial findings on how negative experiences affect psychological health and professional development. The respondent pool was made up of researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders from industry, government, and non-profit organizations that are part of peace and security communities.

These types of discussions can create not only collective understanding of experiences of microaggressions, but can provide compelling evidence of the impact of microaggressions on professional development, advancement, performance, and overall career progression. We offer our data, analysis and recommendations with hopes that we can provide empirical and qualitative evidence to inform relevant policy change to enhance the experience of our membership and all people of color working across peace and security fields and ensure that professional and environmental needs are met during their professional career.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We conclude this report by making a set of recommendations to inform relevant changes at the organizational level. Microaggressions across a variety of settings do not only undermine an individual's sense of safety, belonging, and attachment, but they also have a detrimental impact on the organizational cultural and overall environment at organizations across the world.



As the Nation's largest employer, **the Federal Government must be a model for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility**, where all employees are treated with dignity and respect. Accordingly, the Federal Government must strengthen its ability to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain our Nation's talent and remove barriers to equal opportunity. It must also provide resources and opportunities to strengthen and advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility across the Federal Government. The Federal Government should have a workforce that reflects the diversity of the American people. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that **diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplaces yield higher-performing organizations.**

- White House Executive Order

INTRODUCTION

This microaggressions survey is part of a larger initiative that is designed to help people understand the impact of microaggressions in language and how to change behavior within the peace and security fields. Overall, this project seeks to accomplish four goals:

1. **Define** microaggressions as they are experienced by communities they impact
2. **Provide** greater nuance as to why microaggressions matter and where they “live”
3. **Conduct** actionable analysis
4. **Communicate** strategies on how to do better

As is explained below, quantitative and qualitative responses were used to determine trends and important data that not only informs how we think about microaggressions but also how we react to them in professional spaces. **Almost 200 professionals from over 15 different sub-fields and disciplines of peace and security** provided thoughtful responses. We captured responses to specific scenarios in order to help other professionals think about how they could intervene when microaggressions happen and more easily identify them when they occur.

We want to reiterate our thanks to participants for taking this opportunity to provide invaluable information through this survey. Indeed, this is an opportune moment to capture data about a subject that impacts countless people across peace and security. It is our hope that our work will spark positive change and empower new perspectives.



SURVEY DESIGN

When it comes to interpersonal communication of microaggressions, they can be communicated verbally and non verbally. According to existing research, there are **three main ways** microaggressions can be categorized**:

1. **Microassaults**
2. **Microinvalidations**
3. **Microinsults**

We also included nonverbal microaggressions as a subcategory that touches all three main categories. We asked questions in our survey that captured respondents' personal experiences in all 3 areas, plus asked them to share their experiences dealing with non-verbal microaggressions.

Microassaults: These are deliberate and intentional language and actions that can cause harm. This can take the form of jokes, slurs and abusive language. Intentional microassaults could include racist memes and language, but can also include physical acts like behaving like someone is a threat when you're around certain people, or making or posting offensive signs or pictures.

This can include jokes and also digital media. Jokes were a common example: "I was called "Maria" a stereotypical name for a Latina that is very far from what my real name sounds like."

** Microaggression as a term was first used around 1970 by Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Chester Pierce. Dr. Pierce used this term to describe the regular insults and dismissals he witnessed people who were non-Black using against people who were black...Derald Wing Sue, PhD, a professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University, along with a team of social scientists, would later examine microaggressions closer and classify them to validate what people of color were experiencing.

SURVEY DESIGN

Microinvalidation: This type of microaggression occurs when the aggressor, deliberately or unintentionally, takes actions that discredit or minimize the experiences of a person from an underrepresented group. It is the most common kind of microaggression. Talking over someone, taking credit and interrupting conversations fall in this category. Some examples of participant responses that reflected microinvalidations are below.

"During negotiations when my peers/ other negotiators believe that I am too young or too African to lead discussions." Many who responded also mentioned that they were talked over and some reported being talked over and experiencing harassment. In one instance, a respondent reported that her experiences with microinvalidation were gendered. "Yes, as a woman, I have often been rumored to be involved in affairs with my male superiors. I am occasionally mansplained to or talked over. I have been sexually harassed by clients."

Microinsults: This type of microaggression includes words and actions that disrespect someone's heritage and/or identity and imply that someone doesn't belong in a particular space. Assuming that English is not someone's first language or assuming that someone didn't grow up the way they did because they don't act stereotypically are examples of microinsult. Saying "You're so articulate" falls into this category. Participant responses that also fell into this category included insults that were framed as polite compliments: "You're so pretty for a black woman," and "I didn't expect a Muslim woman to be so educated!"

When it comes to cultural markers like hair, microinsults are sometimes framed as compliments. One respondent recounted her experience: "I have [experienced microaggressions] when it comes to my hair which is curly - when I straighten it I've been told how good it looks and how natural it looks; I may not as often get any comments on the curly look- though some have commented on its length and apparent healthiness. I have been called upon when it comes to issues of color based on my perceived race."

SURVEY DESIGN

A pattern of assumptions based on stereotypes became visible in participants' written responses. One comment referred to jokes but also insults framed as compliments. "Comments on hair, dress/attire, general appearance, language that uses offensive terms for people, casual jokes that rely on racism/sexism/homophobia/transphobia as the punchline, and compliments that are actually backhanded insults because they're framed as wow you're the exception from what I'd expect of _____ group."

Some responses specifically pointed out instances where microaggressions assumed violence and harmful behavior: "I have been told on multiple occasions over multiple years and multiple organizations that I am **"very articulate"** and have been asked **"How did you become so well spoken"** (2) three years ago when asking a supervisor not to state to a senior person in the organization that **"she could take you"** because it connotes stereotypes of aggressive black females, I was told I was being overly sensitive and that people called him **"Taco"** because he was Hispanic and I should just learn to live with it." These assumptions have the ability to cause harm in that if someone is coded as violent or aggressive they are less likely to be in spaces that will allow them to maneuver and network.

Nonverbal Microaggressions: This important subcategory describes instances where microaggressions are conveyed through body language, deliberate or nondeliberate acts, and written and/or electronic communication. In short, nonverbal microaggressions contribute to creating a culture where people are excluded or marginalized even if they don't use words to do it. It makes identifying them that much harder. Nonverbal microaggressions can overlap with any other type of microaggression listed above. An example of this kind of microaggression can be seen in this response: "At a previous organization, I think microaggressions impacted the projects that I was given and had projects taken away without my knowledge despite my excellent performance and without a conversation with my manager. I believe I was also given less space to make mistakes and learn new skills when compared to my white, cis male team members."

SURVEY DESIGN

It is important to note that we asked questions that cover all categories. For this reason, we asked open-ended questions to capture respondents' lived experiences with microaggressions, and also asked respondents to define what microaggressions as a term mean to them. We recognize that individual lived experiences may straddle multiple, or go beyond, existing categories. In addition, we asked what behaviors they associate with microaggressions, how and when they experience them in a professional setting, and, if they were comfortable, to share the impact that microaggressions have had on their career.

It is our sincere hope that through data collection and subsequent analysis collectively, we will increase our capacity to identify microaggressions as they happen and understand the negative impact they may cause. **We also designed this survey as a first step to create tools to disrupt microaggressions as structural inequities and exclusionary behaviors in an attempt to make these communities more inclusive.** Deepening our capacity to understand where microaggressions live in specific programs, policies and practices increases the ability of members and impacted individuals to navigate these spaces moving forward.



PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

The present study summarizes findings of research on the microaggression experiences of professionals working in the field and subfields in peace and security. In December 2022, WCAPS invited its members and partner organizations to participate in a survey. We gave our members and members of partner organizations three months to complete the survey and incentivized the first 100 respondents with five dollar gift cards as a way to say thank you for participating.

Total # of Participants: 186

Race/Ethnicity

Black or African American: 24.6%
 White or Caucasian: 18.6%
 Asian/South Asian: 12.0%
 Latinx or Hispanic: 12.0%
 Two or More: 7.7%
 Asian/East Asian: 6.0%
 Biracial: 4.4%
 Middle Eastern or North African: 3.8%
 West African: 2.7%
 Prefer Not to say: 2.7%
 South East Asian: 2.2%
 Indigenous or Native: 1.1%
 East African: 1.1%
 South African: 0.6%
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 0.6%

Gender Identity

Cis Female: 54.6%
 Female: 31.9%
 Cis Male: 5.95%
 Male: 3.24%
 Gender Non-Conforming: 2.7%
 Other: 1.1%
 Trans Female: 0.5%

Pronoun

She/her: 85%
 He/him: 8%
 They/them: 5.5%

PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

Age Range

26-35: 50.3%

36-45: 18.9%

18-25: 14.6%

46-55: 9.7%

56-65: 6.0%

66+: 0.5%

Working Location

The U.S. : 86%

International: 14%

Career Stage

Early career: 43%

Mid-career: 39%

Senior-level: 18%

Career Focus

International Development: 17.8%

Peacebuilding: 14.4%

Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear

Weapons: 13.8%

National Security: 13.2%

Diplomacy: 9.8%

Policy: 9.8%

Human Rights: 8.6%

Cybersecurity: 3.5%

Climate Change: 2.9%

Intelligence: 1.7%

Public Health: 1.7%

Mental Health: 1.7%

Medical: 1.2%



**SURVEY
RESULTS
AT A GLANCE**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

We asked a series of quantitative questions summarized below. Answers to short answer, qualitative questions are included in the next section. We took a multidimensional approach when choosing what to ask and also when analyzing data and designed questions to capture respondents' experiences with the three categories of microaggressions plus nonverbal experiences. We looked at both negatives and positives and reported as many patterns and trends that were relevant. Our results were eye opening.

- **70%** self-identified as a historically excluded group or community
- **57%** say they are almost always a different racial background than their senior leaders
- **53%** frequently feel like they have to be twice as good at work
- **45%** report being talked over frequently
 - **44%** report being talked over occasionally
- **49%** report that few role models in their chosen field are almost always from their racial background
- **43%** reported that they sometimes experience microaggressions
 - **16%** experience them very often and **12%** experience them often

"I come from a minority ethnic tribe in Kenya (BASUBA) and my features are Asian. I often get singled out at work as not politically aligned and/or gender correct to sit at the table where men discuss nuclear security issues. During engagements, I am mostly singled out as a concern because I have Asian features with African names. When I travel abroad I am treated with contempt in some shops because of my Kenyan accent."



RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **35%** were almost always the only person of their racial background in their workplace
 - **31%** are sometimes the only person.
- **37%** have been occasionally mistaken for a service worker or lower-status worker
- **28%** frequently are singled out to provide diversity discussions or give my opinion on issues related to their race
- **26%** are regularly told that we are living in a post-racism world
- **21%** are frequently told by others that “they don’t see color”
 - **40%** report hearing this comment on occasion
- **19%** report feeling excluded or unwelcome in spaces frequently
 - **50%** feeling this way occasionally

Positives

From our sample size, it seems that some common forms of microaggressions aren’t being experienced by a large portion of respondents.

- **50%** feel like they belong and are part of the team at work.
 - The other **50%** do not report as high of an inclusion rate.
- **35%** said they have never been asked if English was their first language.
 - **25%** said they were rarely asked this question.
- **33%** never have experienced being told they “look like their race.”
 - **26%** rarely have been told this.
- **29%** have never been told that they “don’t act like their race.”
 - **16%** reported that they rarely get asked this question.
- **26%** are spoken to frequently as experts.
- **25%** have never been mistaken for a lower status worker.
 - **20%** report that they rarely have experienced this.

A black and white photograph of two women in heavy coats standing outdoors and talking. The woman on the left is looking towards the woman on the right. A large orange circle is overlaid in the center of the image, containing the text 'NARRATIVE RESPONSES' in white, bold, uppercase letters.

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

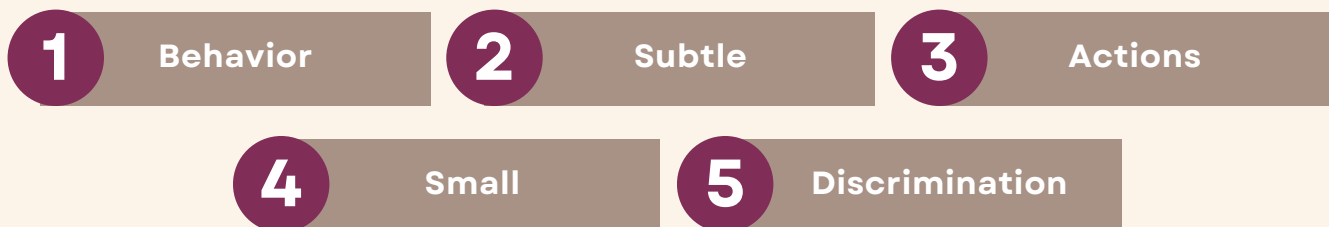
We asked open-ended questions where participants could explain the impact of microaggressions in their own words and tell their own stories that capture their lived experiences. Using a series of open response questions, we hoped to capture narrative responses that address 5 key themes:

1. **Definitions** of microaggressions and their associated behaviors
2. Personal **experiences** with microaggressions
3. **Impact** to career and to communities of practice
4. **Places and Spaces** microaggressions occur at the systemic level
5. Specific **examples** of microaggressive language and alternative words and phrases

Q1: Define microaggressions.

We asked participants to define in their own words what they think microaggressions are and also provide associated behaviors. Out of 128 responses, they defined microaggressions as behavior that could be *intentional* but are mostly *unintentional* acts that end up *reinforcing discrimination or bias against a historically excluded group*. The idea that these acts were *subtle, unintentional and small, yet very frequent* were persistent themes throughout respondents' answers. When it came to defining exact behaviors, many respondents mention jokes and statements of acts that *invalidate and stereotype*, reducing a lived experience into a trope, and unintentionally *making people feel unwelcome or excluded*.

The top 5 words used most frequently to *define* microaggressions:



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Examining the frequency of words used while also understanding the context in which they are used can be useful. Many people defined microaggressions to mean specific behaviors or actions. They also used words like subtle or small frequently to describe microaggressions. In this context, subtle or small is referring to the size of the action, not the psychological or social impact. This reinforces the idea that microaggressions are difficult to define and pin down. One respondent explicitly called out the dynamic nature of the term:

"The term microaggression doesn't fully capture the actions' emotional and material effects or how they impact underrepresented groups. They are "exclusionary" behaviors, often harmful statements, people have said, heard, or participated in. They happen at a much higher frequency to women, people of color, those in the LGBTQ+ community, and those with disabilities."



Respondents were given a chance to define microaggressions using their own words and in doing so, also described them in terms of microassaults, microinvalidations and microinsults, although they may not have used those terms specifically, their responses fell into one or more categories.

"Derogatory comments, ignoring or interrupting marginalized colleagues, taking credit for others' work, touching a Black person's hair without asking, assuming someone is more junior because of their race/gender/age, patronizing tone of voice, not inviting certain colleagues to discussions or events, organizing events that are not inclusive of diverse needs - e.g. having events focus on Christian holidays or drinking alcohol." This comment, as an example, describes unwanted touching (microassaults), inappropriate or demeaning tone (microinvalidations) and derogatory comments (microinsults).

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Q2: Share personal experiences of being the target of microaggressions and what they did (if anything).

Participants were extremely candid and for that we are grateful. They described incidents where their race and gender were part of the microaggressions used against them. Instances of erasure (microinvalidation), harassment (microassaults) and frequent interruption (microinvalidation), were very common among responses.

But mostly, the responses reflected a disconnect in identity and expertise. Meaning incorrect assumptions were made about a person's abilities, knowledge, leadership qualities and expertise because of their race or gender. These assumptions resulted in being "coded" or thought of as "less than" and treated as such. Denied opportunities, harassment, frequent interruptions and erasure were some of the experiences described.

More trends respondents reported were talking over someone, "mansplaining" responses back to them, and talking down to people. Words meant to be complimentary such as calling someone a "hard worker" and "very articulate" to incorrectly calling someone "Ms. instead of Dr.," are examples that were given.



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

An invasion of physical space to include unwanted touching and harassment was also reported. We've included several powerful narratives below that illustrate these themes and appreciate participants' transparency.

"As a young woman, I am often interrupted by senior male colleagues. I have suggested ideas that were not taken seriously until a male colleague suggested them later. I once wrote a funding bid that was successful on a project **I was meant to lead, giving me a career development opportunity, but the opportunity was given to an older man I had been managing**, who was then promoted to above me. Patronizing comments from older male colleagues. Being treated as if I am being aggressive or improper when asking for more resources for my team, while male counterparts are treated as if they are being assertive. Senior people taking credit for my work, or not crediting me. **People assume that male colleagues are more knowledgeable or capable on certain topics, despite me being more qualified and experienced**, and those male colleagues getting opportunities instead of me as a result."



When asked how they handled microaggressions in a professional setting, **there were 3 main ways** people addressed incidents after they happened:

1. Calling out behavior on the spot
2. Ignoring
3. Working through formal channels including speaking to HR.

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Q3: How microaggressions impact careers.

"At a previous organization, I think microaggressions impacted the projects that I was given, and **had projects taken away without my knowledge despite my excellent performance and without a conversation with my manager.** I believe I was also given less space to make mistakes and learn new skills when compared to my white, cis male team members."



When it comes to the impact on careers, the results are mixed. Some respondents said it makes them hypersensitive and experience anxiety. Some reported that microaggressions have stopped their career progression entirely, while some say they do not affect their careers very much.

As the quantitative data shows:

50% of participants feel like they belong and are part of the team at work

50% did not feel belonging

For those who experienced an impact on their careers, the impact on identity was a dominant theme. Microaggressions have an effect on how respondents see themselves and how others in the workplace perceive them. Using words like "diminished," "less valued," and "self-conscious," participants reveal that in their experiences, microaggressions are linguistic frameworks and nonverbal actions that create real-life obstacles.

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

One respondent reported that because of microaggressions they are "more likely to be perceived as aggressive." Another reported that they are "constantly second-guessing whether to speak up or make corrections in situations of obvious wrongdoing based on concerns of being labeled as aggressive, mean, confrontational, etc." The same respondent reported, "significant, consistent stress levels over the years have decreased my physical immune system capabilities."

One additional theme that emerged was the idea that progression happens **IN SPITE** of microaggressions. One respondent reported that experiencing microaggressions "added fuel to my fire to keep moving forward harder and faster." Another said that "they have made me both more insecure and also stronger in different circumstances and at different times. They have made other people question my ability or belonging."

"Earlier on, they've belittled me and made me doubt my skills. Now, as I grow more confident, they tend to ignite a flame in me that makes me better at calling them out and reporting when necessary."



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Q4: What changes to systems can occur if these practices are curbed?

84 respondents overwhelmingly felt that a reduction in microaggressions would have a sizable impact on peace and security fields. **7 themes emerged** from these responses, and below is an exemplifying response for each theme:

Theme 1: Better policy alignment

“I think eliminating or mitigating microaggressions will lead to increased diversity in the field, from which it follows that discussions in the field **will feature more diverse perspectives**. I see this as an unmitigated plus, which would lead to more robust policy.”



Theme 2: A workforce where people are likely to share ideas

“The **more comfortable people feel, the more likely they are to share** their ideas -- and the more likely it becomes for any organization to have the full set of good ideas to surface”



Theme 3: A more peaceful world

“A field that addresses the harms suffered by those most affected and therefore a field that develops solutions that have **a positive impact on everyone** and not the white. U.S., elite.”



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Theme 4: A more diverse and inclusive workforce.

“I hope that we would see a field that better represents the diversity of the country across all levels (leadership, mid-level, entry-level). Over the long-term, I would hope to **see changes in norms and values of the field as more diverse life experiences** are represented in our understanding of the field/knowledge source.”



Theme 5: More innovation

“The less people are weighed down by microaggressions, the more they are able to thrive in their work, which can **lead to innovative approaches** to this work, better outcomes, and ability for the sectors to be more effective”



Theme 6: A stronger national security

“Diversity of voices and perspectives will mean better exchange of ideas and result in better policy that represents more communities. **Validating and respecting the people who work on issues at the intersection of national security and racial justice** will sustain/expand talent in our field and help foreign policy/peace/security become more salient issues to the public.”



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Theme 7: A different approach to peace and security

Perhaps the most surprising discovery was that respondents felt that fewer microaggressions would impact how analysts and practitioners approach peace and security, creating a profession that is more diverse, but one that takes a distinctly "human-centric approach." In terms of who is considered an expert, a reduction in microaggressions would help broaden the scope of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

"We'd have a more human centric, inclusive understanding of national security. And we'd have as equals in our work a much more diverse set of experts and thought leaders, bringing more innovation and deep thinking to solving the problems we face today."



An ideological shift informing approaches to national security, one that prioritizes collaboration over competition, was also mentioned as a consequence of fewer microaggressions.

"Humanizing others from all over the world and a step closer to seeing others as equals and collaborators rather than competition."



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Q5: Identify commonly used words that evoke microaggressions with the caveat that, although they've been normalized, can cause harm.

Many respondents opted not to answer this question. However, those that did say that while they couldn't recall specific words or phrases, they did say that how people talk about specific countries and groups of people matters. "I wouldn't say specific words, but my office works with over 145 partner countries and people personify countries when they talk about them or make jokes about the countries (for example, "You know how the Nigerians are, I hate doing anything with them" or "Pakistan will be Pakistan, they're going to be a headache")."

Words in context were identified as more problematic than the words themselves. As an example, several responses mentioned diversity as a harmful term when it's performative and used to tokenize: "Diverse/diversity. It isn't seen as a word that causes harm, but the problem is when folks are told they were brought in for their diverse background, and no action is taken beyond having diversity."

"Terms that mostly separate white dominant vs. non-white dominant (Global North v. Global South, developed v. developing) as they are stepped in colonial narratives and logics, particularly in reinforcing barbarism or a lack of progress. Various definitions of violence, particularly what account for political violence, overlook the much-lived experience of non-white communities subjected to large-scale, systemic violence. Aren't police extrajudicial killings in the U.S. a form of political violence? This discourse is dominated by largely white men who dismiss structural violence, perhaps because it is outside of their lived experience."



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Other respondents took issue with specific words or phrases no matter what the context is. As an example, one respondent said gendered language like "Latina" or "Latino" as opposed to the more inclusive Latinx, "can be polarizing or exclusionary toward Spanish-speakers who use "Latine/Latinx" to identify themselves." The same respondent also mentioned that terms like "gender" in the context of foreign policy are an-encompassing, noting that It's very common to say "gender" when people mean "cisgender women."

Microaggressions also are crucial to framing how we talk about people and places. Respondents noted that this can become problematic: "I study/aspire to work on Africa-related issues and I find that the language and chosen optics around Africa are usually highlighting poverty, corruption, violence, which I feel limits approaches ones that increase dependence on foreign intervention. Microaggressions can also occur when there is an inconsistency in the application." "Capacity building" was identified as a term that is not equally applied. One respondent said that it's "used for people of the global south but not for people from the north."

Another surprising discovery was the use of microaggressions in metaphors. As an example, one participant pointed out that using water metaphors when discussing people is a microaggression: "Using water metaphors to refer to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, e.g. "flows", "tide", "wave", "stream" --> movements of people, people on the move." Other phrases and words that respondents said **evoked microaggressions** were:

open kimono	international development	Bossy	High performing diversity	Irrational
I'll take silence as consent	Underdeveloped country	Illegals/illegal immigrants	Hallway reputation	Third world
Beneficiaries	"Migrants" and "immigrants"	Global south	Overly sensitive	Developing countries

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Q6: Identify spaces, texts, and places where microaggressions happen.

"The words are fine, but **it's the inaction to live up to the word that is the problem.** Better practices should encourage diversity to be "step 1" for DEI initiatives and to acknowledge the importance of "inclusion"



Microaggressions show up in many professional spaces ranging from government and organization-produced reports to interpersonal communication between colleagues. However, they are often so subtle and engrained in everyday practice, they can be difficult to identify. When asked to provide tangible examples, most participants noted that although they could not recall a particular text, they could point to eurocentric themes and neo-colonialist undertones as a problem.

"Default lens is often that of a (neo)capitalist, white-supremacist undertone where people and nature are viewed as dispensable, and that 'peace' and 'security' can only be achieved through violence." White Savior mentality was also mentioned as a theme that permeates peace and security discourse.

The responses to this question are divided into 3 sections:

1. Microaggressions as Linguistic Frames
2. Gender in Peace and Security
3. Visual Microaggressions
 - a. Palatability

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Microaggressions as Linguistic Frames

Microaggressions, according to participants, are also integral when framing issues in peace and security and that framing can reinforce problematic stereotypes that lead to policy with racist undertones and result in real harm. One response mentioned language around indigenous protests as an example. "A lot of the articles about indigenous protests frame them as violent/destructive, often are disparaging and biased."

For many people, it's not specific terms that are problematic but how these terms appear in context to reinforce existing power dynamics and racial hierarchies. One respondent pointed to inconsistencies and double standards when it comes to nuclear programs; the U.S. and U.K., as examples, are framed as "responsible nuclear powers" while [they] demonize non-white countries that want the advantages of a nuclear program."

Those who chose to answer these questions on microaggressions pointed out that they can show up everywhere from public health communication to Global War on Terror (GWOT) policies.

One participant specifically pointed to COVID-19 literature and problematic framing when it comes to China: "Plenty of 'literature' related to the origins of COVID-19 is overtly racist. It's one thing to talk about the egregious failings and human rights crimes of the CCP, but painting all of China with the party brush is reductive and hinders constructive efforts to engage and defend against our mutual vulnerabilities" Other respondents mentioned Post 9/11 and GWOT policies such as the Patriot Act and No Fly lists. "All have racist undertones against Muslims and Middle Easterners."

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Gender in Peace and Security

While most people who gave thoughtful responses did not point to specifics, they did describe exclusionary language when it comes to talking about gender. As one respondent puts it, "Even when feminists, they frequently exclude specific intersectional challenges faced by women of colour and women living with disabilities. As such, people of colour, who are non-cis-gender females, and living with disabilities are often treated as non-existent."

Responses also gave us some examples of microaggressions in celebratory spaces as well: "Flowery language used to describe women succeeding in previously male-dominated fields are patronizing because the hidden connotation is that women usually cannot handle it."

Responses also critiqued the key texts and epistemological foundations of Peace and Security. As an example, one respondent pointed out that foundational texts in reproductive health "are based upon racist studies that draw conclusions based upon racial stereotypes instead of actual scientific discovery."



NARRATIVE RESPONSES

Visual Microaggressions

We learned a lot from the short answer portion of the survey and one of the most insightful findings is a potential fifth category of microaggressions that occur in visual information and visual communication. Academic and even Information Operations literature points to the ability of art, memes, and pictures to communicate belief systems quickly but not a lot has been written on visual microaggressions as tools to communicate harmful stereotypes. In fact, most of the literature discusses microaggressions occurring through acts and words but tends to under-discuss ways they are communicated visually. This is significant, as this was something highlighted in our survey responses. One respondent addresses the impact of visual communication of microaggressions by specifically pointing to the artwork on international reports.

Using "poster" children of colour as the front cover of reports for the UN, World Bank, EU, etc. Especially when they are children who appear happy when the report is on a topic like human rights violations or people otherwise in desperate situations. It feeds into the narrative that "people who are poor from X Third World country are so happy," when in reality many are struggling hugely and would likely be much happier if they had more access to material resources, and also implicitly prioritizes the reader feeling "comfortable" and "not upset" by the image on the cover page over accurately portraying the kinds of hardships the report itself is about."

Palatability

Whitewashing topics that are uncomfortable for heteronormative, cis-gendered, or white audiences is a form of racism because it centers comfortable and non-threatening inaccuracies for the benefit of these groups in areas such as world history, policy and pop culture. Authenticity is replaced by palatability and it is this very concept of palatability that can be communicated via visual microaggressions.

NARRATIVE RESPONSES

At its core, something that is palatable is something designed to be pleasant and nonthreatening to the status quo. It's suggested in thoughtful responses that visual information that communicates this idea is also a microaggression. It certainly meets the criteria of a microaggression in that it can be subtle, small and unintentional yet harmful and impactful. This sentiment can be seen in the comment below:

"The idea of palatability I feel is linked to racism in that there is an assumption that people should care about children of colour because they are children - but there is an implicit message that adults or the wider community of colour is not (as) important. This happens in migration reporting, where "women and children" of color are portrayed as being in a separate, protected category (with sexist ideas of helplessness and no agency applied), whereas men are demonized as criminals."



NEXT STEPS

NEXT STEPS

Recommendations for Language Alternative

38% of participants of the 69 people who answered could not recall specific words or phrases, but **24%** could provide alternative language. Here's a list of their suggestions:

X Not That	✓ Say This
Beneficiaries	Project Participants or Clients
Capacity building	Knowledge Sharing
Malign or Authoritative	Non-democratic
Open Kimono	Fully Transparent
Silence is Consent	If there are not any votes against, let's move on
Terrorism	Extremism
Western, historically exploited countries	Be specific about who you're talking about
Marginalized Community	Non Hegemonic Community
Binary Pronouns	Gender Neutral Terms

NEXT STEPS

Concrete Lessons Learned and Takeaways

Overall, we were extremely happy with the level of engagement and willingness of participants to share their personal stories and lived experiences with us. We recognize that self-disclosing this kind of information can be difficult. From the data and stories they provided, we were able to see important patterns and extract key themes and trends.

- They are not harmless. Microaggressions are identified as acts that can prevent career advancement and make people question their belonging in their field.

"I have been **diminished in several circles for looking much younger than my age, or for being too 'assertive' without being given any explanation of what assertiveness means - where male counterparts, or British counterparts, have been granted opportunities that I have not been given and have not been questioned on their belonging in the rooms.**"



- They are subtle. Many respondents didn't give specific definitions but took a "you know it when you see it," approach to definition.
- They create real-world problems and harm.

"It has given me **work-related PTSD and anxiety and undermined my professional confidence.** It has made team cohesion difficult to establish on subsequent new teams and diminished my ability to be safe at work in general."



NEXT STEPS

- They depend on a lack of cultural knowledge and cultural visibility. As an example, scheduling an event on a religious holiday where you do not celebrate can be not only thoughtless but signals to someone who does celebrate that they do not belong. Your lack of cultural knowledge does not make up for the exclusionary culture created.
- Microaggressive acts fall under a huge umbrella. As an example, some experience microaggressions because they look "too much" like their race or ethnicity AND because they don't look enough like their race or ethnicity.

"Your face doesn't fit your English accent and language skills;" "You don't look Burmese enough;" "It cannot be." (The person could not believe that I was Burmese, born, and raised in Myanmar.) "You are over-qualified for a woman and we'd prefer a male consultant;" "You don't act like you're Christian and you can't be Muslim because your skin is not so black, so I thought that you were Buddhist but you don't look Buddhist. Are you Jew?;" "Asian women aren't supposed to be opinionated and aggressive like this; you are a viper" (this final one, because I called the person out on their unacceptable behavior). Sexually suggestive jokes, insults, and word-play passed off as teasing and relieving tension."



- What "counts" as a microaggression is always changing and evolving. As an example, someone suggested that hosting a social with alcohol and not providing an alternative can be a microaggression because not participating can hurt one's career.

NEXT STEPS

- They are very real. Sometimes the denial that these things occur can be worse than the initial act.
- They can be avoided a lot of the time when an organizational culture has a growth mindset.
- Educating people in the peace and security fields on the impact of microaggressions can create a positive impact on the field and subfields.
- You are not immune from experiencing microaggressions and also perpetuating microaggressions. They are often unintentional. You will make mistakes and may employ microaggressions against other people. Critical listening and learning is key to making sure microaggressions don't perpetuate and become part of the culture at your workplace.

"I think sexism which underlies microaggressions has held back my career. I have sought mental health counseling for sexual harassment, which is not a microaggression, but a lot of the advice I was given after reporting did cross over into microaggressions. In some ways, I found the rejection of my claim of sexual harassment worse than the actual harassment."



NEXT STEPS

Implications for Future Research

There is limited research in the area of microaggressions specifically in the peace and security fields. We feel that this first survey is an important first step in closing an existing gap in both microaggression research and peace and security studies. Our long term goal is to eventually compile a revised framework to reduce microaggressions in speech and actions in the peace and security spaces and produce actionable guidance and make positive social change.

While we are grateful to those who participated, we would like to build off of this initial survey in future iterations. We would like to capture more participant data in the future.

Considering existing evidence and determining what areas we would like more information on can help identify deficiencies in information and create exciting opportunities for research. It is not only important to identify these opportunities but also to determine how the evidence may serve as an actionable resource for activists, policymakers, and funders.

In the future we will focus on:

- increase our sample size
- increase the number from each gender and race/ethnicity category
- Allowing more than one way for participants to submit responses that go beyond surveys
- Asking more questions to determine language and behavioral alternatives
- Allowing more than one way for participants to submit responses that go beyond surveys
- Increase the number of international participants
- Capture more stories and narratives

A grayscale photograph of a woman wearing a hijab, sitting at a desk and working on a laptop. She is looking intently at the screen with her hands resting on her chin. In the background, another person is visible working at a desk. A large orange circle is overlaid on the image, containing the word "RESOURCES" in white capital letters.

RESOURCES

RESOURCES

Federal and Publicly Funded Organizations

- [NIH: The What, the Why, and the How: A Review of Racial Microaggressions Research in Psychology](#)
- [Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [PBS](#)
- [NPR: Microaggressions Are A Big Deal: How To Talk Them Out And When To Walk Away](#)

Associations

- [National Education Association](#)

Video Resources

- [Video: MTV Stop telling me I'm 'pretty for a black girl' Here's what you're really telling me](#)
- [Video: Microaggressions in Higher Education: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact](#)
- [Video: Derald Sue Wing Explains Microaggressions](#)
- [Video: Lecture on Microaggressions and Marginality by Derald Sue Wing](#)

Mental Health and Disabilities

- [Addressing Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions in Therapy](#)
- [Microaggressive Experiences of People with Disabilities by Richard M. Keller and Corinne E. Galgay](#)
- [The Impact of Racial Microaggressions on Mental Health: Counseling Implications for Clients of Color](#)
- [“It’s killing us!” Narratives of Black Adults about Microaggressions Experiences and Related Health Stress](#)

RESOURCES

Academic Books and Peer Reviewed Research

- [Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation by Derald Sue Wing](#)
- [Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life by Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin](#)
- [A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions by Kevin L. Nadal](#)
- [Examples of Verbal and Nonverbal Microaggressions](#)
- [Microaggressions and Daily Experience: Depicting Life as it is Lived](#)
- [Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact](#)
- [Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life](#)

Impact on Gender and Sexuality

- [That's so gay! Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community](#)

In the Classroom

- [Gender Microaggressions and Learning Environments: The Role of Physical Space in Teaching Pedagogy and Communication](#)
- [Teacher and Student Perceptions of Microaggressions in College Classrooms](#)

RESOURCES

Race: Impact and Strategies

- [Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Is subtle bias harmless?\(Derald Wing Sue](#)
- [Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research](#)
- [Worse than Blatant Racism: A Phenomenological Investigation of Microaggressions among Black Women](#)
- [Preventing Racial, Ethnic, Gender, Sexual Minority, Disability, and Religious Microaggressions: Recommendations for Promoting Positive Mental Health \(p. 22-27\) by Kevin L. Nadal](#)
- [Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans](#)
- [Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders.](#)

Racial and Ethnic Experiences

- [Unconscious Biases: Racial Microaggressions in American Indian Health Care](#)
- [“Do you live in a teepee?” Aboriginal Students’ Experiences with Racial Microaggressions in Canada](#)
- [Racial Microaggressions against African American Clients in Cross-Racial Counseling Relationships](#)
[Differences in Experiences of Racial and Ethnic Microaggression among Asian, Latino/Hispanic, Black, and White Young Adults](#)
- [Racial Battle Fatigue for Latina/o Students A Quantitative Perspective](#)
- [Daily Racial Microaggressions and Ethnic Identification among Native American Young Adults](#)
- [Microaggressions and Hmong American Students](#)



ORGANIZATIONS IN SOLIDARITY

Access more
[OiS publications and resources here!](#)

