

May More Voices: Microaggressions—A Thousand Cuts

Category: Microaggressions: A Thousand Cuts
written by Paul Gross | May 1, 2026

Dear readers,

What I learned about microaggressions firsthand might have come when I was a teenager—two years ahead of myself in school, short and late to enter puberty. There was a time when I came up to my friends' shoulders—still the right size to climb a jungle gym while they looked ready to start dating.

Thing is, the barbs I received at that age were not micro or unintentional, they were intentional and macro.

“You're a senior? You look like a freshman!”

Such comments reminded me of what I wished so badly to forget—that I was short and physically immature. Luckily, time was on my side. My outward appearance eventually changed—until I became an average-looking white guy, despite the fact that my father was Cuban.

As that average-looking white guy, I've not suffered many microaggressions, but I have perpetrated a few. I didn't *mean* to hurt anyone. Honest. And yet, I'm sure I've inflicted a few cuts. Here are three instances:

(1) For a period of time, the residency program where I taught had two Black residents who, standing side by side, looked nothing alike. Yet I kept confusing them—to the point that I would freeze when I saw one of them, unsure of whether to hazard a guess at their name. As often as not, when I did guess, I was wrong.

Studies show that you'll do a better job of distinguishing people from your own ethnic group than people from other backgrounds. I once taught in a program where a resident of color kept confusing me with another white guy who was about my height, with the same hair color. The other white guy and I got a kick out of it; we thought it was funny. But I can see where, if you're in the minority and want to be seen beyond your skin color, it wouldn't be quite so funny. I could see it getting old very quickly, no matter how well intentioned this white guy says he is.

(2) Whenever I had encounters with store clerks, waitpersons and other individuals with a Spanish accent, it was my habit to speak with them in Spanish, working around to telling them that my dad was Cuban. I thought I was trying to be friendly and make a connection. It should have occurred to me that my own father, who had a decided Spanish accent (some compared his to that of Ricky Ricardo) would have been insulted if an American had pulled that on him. It now strikes me that lapsing into Spanish telegraphs to someone who's trying to fit in, *You're not passing as an American*—something

my own father desperately wanted to do.

So at some point—not that long ago—I stopped doing that. If someone speaks to me in English, I respond in English. Pretty simple. (Isn't that what I'd want a Parisian to do if I spoke to them in French?)

(3) It was my habit to ask medical students I worked with where they were from. I asked that of everyone, but I felt particularly curious about students of color. I was also more curious about their family's country of origin. My curiosity was filled with good intent: I wanted them to feel that I saw them and was interested in their story.

It only gradually dawned on me that a student might not want me to see them in that way. *I notice your difference*, they might hear. *How did you arrive at this privileged position?*

I felt stuck. I wanted to get to know every student I worked with. At the same time, I didn't want to make a student feel profiled. So I began starting my questioning with, "I always ask students a little about themselves..." Did that work to prevent cuts? I can't know for sure.

No one said this was easy.

May's *More Voices* theme is [Microaggressions: A Thousand Cuts](#). What's your experience of experiencing microaggressions—as a recipient or as a perpetrator?

Share your story using the [More Voices Submission Form](#). For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#). And have a look at last month's theme: [Guts](#).

Remember, your story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you. And thanks for being a part of the *Pulse* community.

Warmly,

Paul Gross
Editor