

## Let's not dismiss the painful pattern of microaggressions

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The resignation of University of Toronto emeritus history professor Michael Marrus from a senior fellowship at Massey College has provoked discussion far beyond the College. In an exchange covered elsewhere, Marrus made a slavery-related remark to a Black Junior Fellow, in reference to the approach of the College's head or "Master," that concerned the graduate student and others nearby.

As word of the incident spread, petitions demanding action from the College attracted hundreds of signatures. The upshot to date, in addition to Marrus's resignation, has been an official apology from Massey College and the suspension of the use of the title "Master" for the head of the College, among other commitments.

There has been much public debate over whether the consequences for Professor Marrus were proportionate to his action, which he described in an apology letter as "a poor effort at jocular humour." The contours of this debate are familiar: should a joke that causes offense be shrugged off or taken seriously as a symptom of a larger problem? Are those who don't laugh along oversensitive, or rightly holding people and institutions to account?

Our goal is not to revisit the specifics of the Marrus incident. We propose to widen the scope of the conversation with some unique and recent empirical evidence drawn from a seven-year study of the experiences of self-identified Black people in the Greater Toronto Area.

What is the context into which a joke is launched? How often might Black people – especially those in institutions where they've been historically underrepresented – find themselves on the receiving end? Is it a rare event or quotidian?

The Black Experience Project (BEP), whose results were released in July, was an unprecedented survey of 1504 self-identified Black people aged 16 and over in the GTA. The focus was their experience of being Black in everyday life in our city region: at school, at work, at leisure, in civic and political life, when shopping, or simply moving around the city.

Four in five participants in our study reported experiencing unfair treatment based on race, in one or more forms of micro-aggressions, on a regular basis. Examples of micro-aggressions included: general condescension; intuiting that others expected their work to be inferior; or being treated as an intimidating presence. (It's worth noting that micro-aggressions were by no means the whole story; other forms of discrimination – for example, involving employers and the police – were also widely reported.)

Some people who aren't subject to micro-aggressions view them as small, unimportant experiences that are blown out of proportion. But BEP participants told us their effects are real and cumulative. One respondent called these day-to-day harms a form of "quiet violence." Another, a Member of Parliament, described the relentless experience of subtle discrimination as "death by a thousand cuts."

Most of us go through life hoping to be judged on our behaviour, not on what others can surmise about us based on our appearance: our gender presentation, the colour of our skin, the clothing we wear, including religious dress. Martin Luther King's hope that his children would be judged "not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character" remains poignant – in part because it remains unrealized.

The Black Experience Project and other surveys show that many Canadians are treated differently because of the face they show the world; anti-Black racism is an especially stubborn force. Institutions of learning have an important role to play in helping their members understand and address manifestations of racism, large and small.

Debates about language, codes of conduct and the nuances of social life may seem granular to some who don't feel at risk of "quiet violence" or "death by a thousand cuts." But to dismiss micro-aggressions as unworthy of attention treats each one as a minor, isolated experience with no meaningful consequences instead of as a painful pattern that shapes the landscape many (our survey suggests most) Black people navigate in their daily lives right here in the GTA.

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