Transcript of **Out of The Woofworks** Episode 5: “Microaggressions”

RACHEL: Welcome back to Out Of The Woofworks, here with me, Rachel Forday, on a podcast where we’ll be talking about dogs, training, and more importantly human social issues, both in the dog industry and the world.

Today, you just have me, and I want to talk about microaggressions because I think as the word suggests, it can be subtle and hard for people both on the acting end and the receiving end to understand and also to deal with.

So let's get right into it!

[Intro Music]

RACHEL: I think when we first start talking about microaggressions, we have to remember a key point. And that is that actions have consequences regardless of what your intention is.

So when your intention is to compliment someone when saying to a Chinese person "You speak very good English for a Chinese person", on the receiving end, it's uncomfortable, sometimes painful. Because it sounds like your assumption is that it's rare that someone that looks like me could speak good English. In a way as well, it doesn't just affect me on a personal level, but it affects me on a community level. I think about what my mum might have experienced when she studied and worked in Australia for a number of years. I think about the Chinese person that runs our local chip shop that may not understand the order from someone with a very strong Scouse English accent on the first listen and has to ask the person to repeat themselves. I think about the whole history of jokes made about Ls and Rs being mixed up, people imitating and mocking Chinese accents or the Chinese language, the term "Chinese whispers", all of these things.

And that is just one example. We of course see instances where people might ask to touch a Black person's hair or worse, just go right ahead and touch it without asking, which is disrespectful and othering. We see People of Colour being asked "But where do you really come from?"

One of the ones I've heard was "Do you guys eat dog where you come from?" literally as I am walking with my dog Dave. I don't know if I need to explain how insensitive that is, but I hope you can imagine why it was really not good.

And in these few interactions I mentioned, perhaps the intention is one of curiosity. Perhaps the intention was not to really harm or be racist or be othering, but just curiosity. But again, the consequences, the way the receiver experienced your actions matters and matters more than your intentions.

While all my examples there were based around race and ethnicity, there are of course microaggressions towards the LGBTQAI+ community like "You don't sound gay" or "You don't look gay". There's the bisexual and pansexual erasure where people might insist someone is straight, lesbian, or gay based on the partner they have at the time or how they look and then they keep on insisting on that. And having your identity invalidated is so uncomfortable and diminishing.

There are microaggressions that are ableist like "Oh you seem totally normal to me" and microaggressions that trivialise disabilities with casual remarks saying "I'm so OCD" when people just mean they like things tidy or clean. We see this in the dog world too with people saying their dogs are autistic because of their reactivity towards certain triggers or because they're taking longer to learn a new cue. Some will say that their dogs are quote unquote "cute but psycho", in which the word "psycho" is stigmatising towards people with psychosis.

Any marginalised group will likely have come across microaggressions from time to time. These are only a few examples. But they can all be incredibly hurtful and carry so much pain with them to the receiver or at the very least, be uncomfortable.

But here's where it gets even harder on the receiver. It starts with worrying about how to respond, or to even respond at all, so there's that stress there. "What if I respond and get told I'm overreacting? Is it easier if I just don't? But if I don't, how can I educate them and stop them from continuing to say the same hurtful things to others in my community?". So that's another level of discomfort, where you feel like you can't even express how you feel about something and it's a big emotional conflict going on internally.

At times, depending on who delivered the microaggressions and who is the receiver, there can be a certain power dynamics there. So if a boss said something for example. If I respond and let them know that was hurtful or that it was a microaggression, what do I risk? Or if someone in a leadership position in the dog training industry or in a dog training organisation acted in such a way, what does the receiver who's a member of the organisation but perhaps not as well known in the industry risk? What do they risk?

In certain scenarios, we could be risking even more, and that's our physical safety. One of the microaggressions Asian people get, which I honestly feel like is more than a microaggression, is being yelled "Ni hao" or "Konnichiwa" at. While these words just mean hello in Mandarin Chinese and Japanese respectively, they are used to mock and to make the receiver uncomfortable and feel different and feel unwelcomed and they often come with laughing. It's also done to any Asian person, even if they aren't Chinese or Japanese, which puts all Asians into a little box. For me, when I get this, I really often feel unsafe. Because of the yelling and because of who's doing it. And so I just ignore it and quickly walk on.

On another level, it's incredibly tiring. Having to educate people around you all the time, strangers, family, friends, colleagues... Even if you feel safe doing it, it can be tiring and that take a toll. You start to think, is it worth it? Is anyone even listening?

But let's say we do respond. Let's say we let the person know why what they said wasn't okay to say, we let them know how we feel about it. And they end up doing what we expect and say things like, "It's just a joke", "Why are you so sensitive?", "My friend from another marginalised group said it's fine for me to say this.", "Everything has to be so politically correct these days", "Oh I'm from an older generation and I have a friend who's Black". All those defensive statements.

And it is understandable. Being called out for harmful behaviour is not a nice feeling. It's quite natural that we want to put those defences up first, and we want to maintain our own comfort. We feel sometimes like we don't know what to do or say to make things better.

But again, there are consequences on the receiving end where we might be going back to question ourselves, "Am I overreacting?", "Should I just chill out?", "Should I just suck i up?". And so that's another level of hurt

there. Especially if we are hoping for empathy or at least some kind of understanding from the person we just expressed ourselves to, it can be really hard.

I have found myself in that position, particularly when I was younger, in my early 20s, and had just moved to England. I would be joining in with the microaggressions, joining in with the jokes, so that I could appear to be part of a social group. So that I seemed "chill" and the "cool, unbothered Asian". So that I could be almost like one of the White people and protect myself from more blatant racism or violence. I internalised a lot of racist things about myself, and let myself be part of the problem, and what came out of it was that I ended up feeling like I don't belong anywhere.

And the not feeling like I belong anywhere part also comes because I didn't really have friends or a community that could understand these things. Now that I do with the amazing BIPOC dog trainers and dog guardian friends that I have around the world, I can see how valuable it is to just have that validation of "I am not overreacting, this is not okay." from someone else. Because then we realise we're not alone.

Going back to the person that may be delivering the microaggressions, as mentioned we can understand the defensiveness, and we can understand that everyone has been conditioned and socialised to have some of these discriminatory thoughts and biases. That's how our society is. So we can understand that there is unconscious and implicit bias in all of us, including marginalised people. But that again, doesn't take away from the consequences experienced by the receiver. Just because we can understand it, it doesn't mean the microaggressive action was okay.

And so if you have been called out for a microaggression, the most important thing that should come first is to really really listen to the receiver. Give them the space they need and learn from what they are saying. Jumping into "Oh sorry sorry sorry" might make you feel better, but it doesn't change things. When you listen to what the receiver is saying then you've learnt something and you can then move forward in the world doing better for the community.

Acknowledge the harm, acknowledge the unconscious bias. Thank the person for taking the time to educate you. Empathise with how exhausting it must be for the receiver. And then work on changing your

language because it's not hard. Yes we may slip up from time to time. But if we slip up and we're able to catch ourselves and make a note for next time, that's great. That's halfway there.

The thing about microaggressions is that they chip away at people who receive them. If we think about trigger stacking in a dog, so that means a dog encountering stressful events repeatedly until they kind of explode, it's like that. For our dogs it's stressful events like getting unwanted pets from a stranger, having an uncomfortable interaction with another dog, having a trip to the vet's, and then finally in the evening when there's some fireworks going off, the dog is just overwhelmed and trigger stacked and might react really strongly.

For humans it's also trigger stacking. It's constantly feeling like you're less than or at the very least, different. It's feeling invalidated. It's stressing out about how to respond to someone, it's feeling exhausted after responding and educating someone. As humans, as social beings, all of this can be really hard and it can take its toll.

Microaggressions also allow for more violent aggression to perpetuate itself. This is where I sometimes question whether microaggression is the right term because of the real violence it can lead to and the damage it can cause. But it's what we have at the moment so it's what we have to go with.

But the way that microaggressions lead to violence is how it normalises the othering or the diminishing of marginalised people. When you see someone as less than or just as their negative stereotypes, it ends up being easier to be violent towards them and not respect them and their lives. We see this in COVID times, where people react with "Oh it's not that bad, only disabled or vulnerable people are at risk and affected by it." and do nothing to protect the community, not even the bare minimum of wearing a mask. We see this of course in violent hate crimes and in the over-criminalisation of and violence towards Black people from authorities.

So finally, here's another thing I want to say if you are the receiver of microaggressions: You don't have to feel obligated to respond. As mentioned earlier, if there are certain risks involved and you don't feel safe, don't respond. But even if there aren't risks, and someone is asking you why they shouldn't say something or what's wrong with something, it's also not your job to educate them and expend that

emotional labour. Protect your own mental health first, speak to people in your community and feel less alone, that's the most important thing to do. Remember, there are resources out there about microaggressions that people who truly care can easily look up and learn about.

And so by the same token, if you've said something that was a microaggression, or you're asking about microagggressions, don't simply expect free available education from the person you're asking and hound them for an answer, that's not ok either. Let the person know you will go learn more about this and really, truly commit to doing so.

I know this wasn't the most dog-centric episode, but I think it's one that's important to talk about and one that everyone could perhaps learn something from. The first step is always learning and being aware of these issues.

So thank you all so much for listening. You can find links and transcriptions in our shownotes. If you can't the link in the description, you can find them on my website dogatheart.co.uk/podcasts. If you enjoyed the podcast and would like to support us and what we're doing, you can buy us a coffee at buymeacoffee.com/dogatheart or you can leave us a nice little review on Apple Podcasts which will help us reach more people! You can also get updates about future guests and episodes on our Instagram @dog_atheart and connect with me. I'll see you in the next one!

[Outro Music]