

## Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (from *Diversity in the Classroom*, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014). **The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical.** Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLES	MESSAGE
<p><b>Alien in One's Own Land</b> When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Where are you from or where were you born?”</li> <li>• “You speak English very well.”</li> <li>• “What are you? You’re so interesting looking!”</li> <li>• A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language.</li> <li>• Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name.</li> </ul>	<p>You are not a true American.</p> <p>You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.</p> <p>Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</p>
<p><b>Ascription of Intelligence</b> Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You are a credit to your race.”</li> <li>• “Wow! How did you become so good in math?”</li> <li>• To an Asian person, “You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?”</li> <li>• To a woman of color: “I would have never guessed that you were a scientist.”</li> </ul>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.</p> <p>All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science.</p> <p>It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.</p>
<p><b>Color Blindness</b> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</li> <li>• “There is only one race, the human race.”</li> <li>• “America is a melting pot.”</li> <li>• “I don’t believe in race.”</li> <li>• Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility /validity of their stories.</li> </ul>	<p>Assimilate to the dominant culture.</p> <p>Denying the significance of a person of color’s racial/ethnic experience and history.</p> <p>Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</p>
<p><b>Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status</b> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches.</li> <li>• A store owner following a customer of color around the store.</li> <li>• Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color.</li> <li>• While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs.</li> </ul>	<p>You are a criminal.</p> <p>You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong.</p> <p>You are dangerous.</p>
<p><b>Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism</b> A statement made when bias is denied.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.”</li> <li>• “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”</li> <li>• To a person of color: “Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can’t believe it.”</li> </ul>	<p>I could never be racist because I have friends of color.</p> <p>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.</p> <p>Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.</p>
<p><b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like faculty demographics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”</li> <li>• “Of course he’ll get tenure, even though he hasn’t published much—he’s Black!”</li> <li>• “Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement.”</li> <li>• “Gender plays no part in who we hire.”</li> <li>• “America is the land of opportunity.”</li> <li>• “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”</li> <li>• “Affirmative action is racist.”</li> </ul>	<p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.</p> <p>The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them.</p> <p>People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</p>

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<p><b>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles</b> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal".</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To an Asian, Latino or Native American: <i>"Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal."</i> <i>"Speak up more."</i></li> <li>Asking a Black person: <i>"Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."</i></li> <li><i>"Why are you always angry?"</i> anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion.</li> <li>Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting.</li> </ul>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.</p> <p>Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.</p>
<p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty of color mistaken for a service worker.</li> <li>Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color.</li> <li>Female doctor mistaken for a nurse.</li> <li>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer.</li> <li>Saying <i>"You people..."</i></li> <li>An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race even though there are other non-Black scientists in this person's specific area of research.</li> <li>An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a "good Black scientist."</li> <li>Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student.</li> <li>In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones.</li> </ul>	<p>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high status positions. Women occupy nurturing positions. Whites are more valued customers than people of color.</p> <p>You don't belong. You are a lesser being.</p> <p>A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning. The contributions of female students are less worthy than the contributions of male students.</p>
<p><b>Sexist/Heterosexist Language</b> Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people.</li> <li>Being constantly reminded by a coworker that <i>"we are only women."</i></li> <li>Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms.</li> <li>Two options for relationship status: married or single.</li> <li>A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay.</li> </ul>	<p>Male experience is universal. Female experience is invisible.</p> <p>LGBT categories are not recognized. LGBT partnerships are invisible.</p> <p>Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior.</p>
<p><b>Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping</b> Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks <i>"What do you need to work on this for anyway?"</i></li> <li><i>"You're a girl, you don't have to be good at math."</i></li> <li>A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger.</li> <li>An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training.</li> <li>Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian.</li> <li>Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a "b____," while describing a male counterpart as a "forceful leader."</li> </ul>	<p>Women are less capable in math and science.</p> <p>Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.</p> <p>Women are out of line when they are aggressive.</p>

## Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions

MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLE AND THEME	THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION EXAMPLE	COMMUNICATION APPROACH
<p><b>Alien in One's Own Land</b> To a Latino American: "Where are you from?"</p> <p><b>Ascription of Intelligence</b> To an Asian person, "You're all good in math, can you help me with this problem?"</p> <p><b>Color Blindness</b> "I don't believe in race."</p>	<p>"I'm just curious. What makes you ask that?"</p> <p>"I heard you say that all Asians are good in math. What makes you believe that?"</p> <p>"So, what do you believe in? Can you elaborate?"</p>	<p><b>INQUIRE</b> Ask the speaker to elaborate. This will give you more information about where s/he is coming from, and may also help the speaker to become aware of what s/he is saying. <b>KEY PHRASES:</b> "Say more about that." "Can you elaborate on your point?" "It sounds like you have a strong opinion about this. Tell me why." "What is it about this that concerns you the most?"</p>
<p><b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."</p> <p><b>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles</b> Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."</p>	<p>"So you feel that everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough. Can you give me some examples?"</p> <p>"It appears you were uncomfortable when ___ said that. I'm thinking that there are many styles to express ourselves. How we can honor all styles of expression—can we talk about that?"</p>	<p><b>PARAPHRASE/REFLECT</b> Reflecting in one's own words the essence of what the speaker has said. Paraphrasing demonstrates understanding and reduces defensiveness of both you and the speaker. Restate briefly in your own words, rather than simply parroting the speaker. Reflect both content and feeling whenever possible. <b>KEY PHRASES:</b> "So, it sounds like you think..." "You're saying... You believe..."</p>
<p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> You notice that your female colleague is being frequently interrupted during a committee meeting.</p> <p><b>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles</b> To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist."</p>	<p>Responder addressing the group: "____ brings up a good point. I didn't get a chance to hear all of it. Can ____ repeat it?"</p> <p>"I'm wondering what message this is sending her. Do you think you would have said this to a white male?"</p>	<p><b>REFRAME</b> Create a different way to look at a situation. <b>KEY PHRASES:</b> "What would happen if..." "Could there be another way to look at this..." "Let's reframe this..." "How would you feel if this happened to your ____..."</p>
<p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> Saying "You people..."</p> <p><b>Use of Heterosexist Language</b> Saying "That's so gay."</p>	<p>"I was so upset by that remark that I shut down and couldn't hear anything else."</p> <p>"When I hear that remark, I'm offended too, because I feel that it marginalizes an entire group of people that I work with."</p>	<p><b>USE IMPACT AND "I" STATEMENTS</b> A clear, nonthreatening way to directly address these issues is to focus on oneself rather than on the person. It communicates the impact of a situation while avoiding blaming or accusing the other and reduces defensiveness. <b>KEY PHRASES:</b> "I felt ____ (feelings) when you said or did ____ (comment or behavior), and it ____ (describe the impact on you)."</p>
<p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> A woman who is talked over.</p> <p>Making a racist, sexist or homophobic joke.</p>	<p>She responds: "I would like to participate, but I need you to let me finish my thought."</p> <p>"I didn't think this was funny. I would like you to stop."</p>	<p><b>USE PREFERENCE STATEMENTS</b> Clearly communicating one's preferences rather than stating them as demands or having others guess what is needed. <b>KEY PHRASES:</b> "What I'd like is..." "It would be helpful to me if..."</p>

Adapted from Kenney, G. (2014). *Interrupting Microaggressions*, College of the Holy Cross, Diversity Leadership & Education. Accessed on-line, October 2014. Kraybill, R. (2008). "Cooperation Skills," in Armster, M. and Amstutz, L., (Eds.), *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, pp. 116-117. LeBaron, M. (2008). "The Open Question," in Armster, M. and Amstutz, L., (Eds.), *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, pp. 123-124. Peavey, F. (2003). "Strategic Questions as a Tool for Rebellion," in Brady, M., (Ed.), *The Wisdom of Listening*, Boston: Wisdom Publ., pp. 168-189.

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<p><b>Color Blindness</b> “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</p> <p><b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> “Of course he’ll get tenure, even though he hasn’t published much—he’s Black!”</p>	<p>“So you don’t see color. Tell me more about your perspective. I’d also like to invite others to weigh in.”</p> <p>“So you believe that _____ will get tenure just because of his race. Let’s open this up to see what others think.”</p>	<p><b>RE-DIRECT</b> Shift the focus to a different person or topic. (Particularly helpful when someone is asked to speak for his/her entire race, cultural group, etc.)</p> <p><b>KEY PHRASES:</b> “Let’s shift the conversation...” “Let’s open up this question to others....”</p>
<p><b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> In a committee meeting: “Gender plays no part in who we hire.”</p> <p>“Of course she’ll get tenure, even though she hasn’t published much—she’s Native American!”</p> <p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones.</p>	<p>“How might we examine our implicit bias to ensure that gender plays no part in this and we have a fair process? What do we need to be aware of?”</p> <p>“How does what you just said honor our colleague?”</p> <p>“What impact do you think this has on the class dynamics? What would you need to approach this situation differently next time?”</p>	<p><b>USE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS</b> It is the skill of asking questions that will make a difference. A strategic question creates motion and options, avoids “why” and “yes or no” answers, is empowering to the receiver, and allows for difficult questions to be considered. Because of these qualities, a strategic question can lead to transformation. Useful in problem-solving, difficult situations, and change efforts.</p> <p><b>KEY PHRASES:</b> “What would allow you...” “What could you do differently....” “What would happen if you considered the impact on...”</p>
<p><b>Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping</b> In the lab, an adviser asks a female student if she is planning to have children while in postdoctoral training.</p>	<p>To the adviser: “I wanted to go back to a question you asked _____ yesterday about her plans for a family. I’m wondering what made you ask that question and what message it might have sent to her.”</p> <p>To the student: “I heard what your advisor said to you yesterday. I thought it was inappropriate and I just wanted to check in with you.”</p>	<p><b>REVISIT</b> Even if the moment of a microaggression has passed, go back and address it. Research indicates that an unaddressed microaggression can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself.</p> <p><b>KEY PHRASES:</b> “I want to go back to something that was brought up in our conversation/meeting/class ....” “Let’s rewind ___ minutes...”</p>

### CONSIDERATIONS:

- The communication approaches are most effective when used in combination with one another, e.g., using impact and preference statements, using inquiry and paraphrasing together, etc.
- Separate the person from the action or behavior. Instead of saying “you’re racist”, try saying “that could be perceived as a racist remark.” Being called a racist puts someone on the defensive and can be considered “fighting words.”
- Avoid starting questions with “Why”—it puts people on the defensive. Instead try “how” “what made you .....
- When addressing a microaggression, try to avoid using the pronoun “you” too often—it can leave people feeling defensive and blamed. Use “I” statements describing the impact on you instead or refer to the action indirectly, e.g., “when \_\_\_\_\_ was said...” or “when \_\_\_\_\_ happened...”
- How you say it is as critical as what you say, e.g., tone of voice, body language, etc. The message has to be conveyed with respect for the other person, even if one is having a strong negative reaction to what’s been said. So it is helpful to think about your intention when interrupting a microaggression—e.g., do you want that person to understand the impact of his/her action, or stop his/her behavior, or make the person feel guilty, etc. Your intention and the manner in which you execute your intention make a difference.
- Sometimes humor can defuse a tense situation.

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