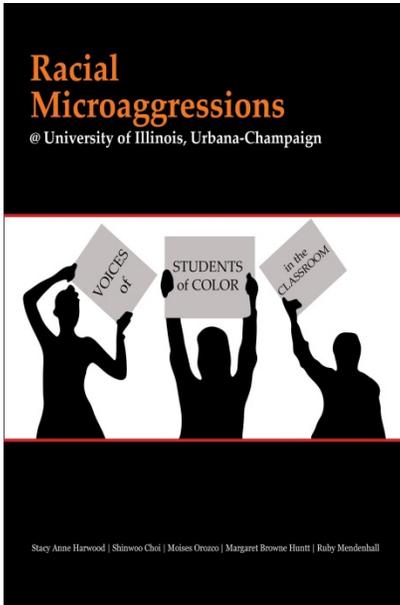


Racial Microaggressions: Doing the Hard Work of Building a Diverse and Inclusive University Community

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Racial Microaggressions



Definition: “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

Microinsults: Convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage.

Microassaults: Explicit derogatory comments or violent verbal or nonverbal attacks.

Microinvalidations: Exclude, negate, or nullify the experiential reality of people of color.

Environmental RMAs: “Racial assaults, insults and invalidations which are manifested on systemic and environmental levels” (Sue et al., 2007).

Examples of Racial Microaggressions

- “Where were you born?” (You are not American/You are a foreigner) [Microinvalidation]
- “You are so articulate.” (It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent) [Microinsult]
- “When I look at you, I don’t see color.” (Denying racial experiences) [Microinvalidation]
- “Why do you have to be so loud? Just calm down.” (Assimilate to dominate culture) [Microinsult]
- Being ignored at a store counter/in class as attention is given to the White customer/student behind you. (Whites are more valued customers than people of color) [Microassault]
- Only one or a few students of color in a classroom or major (don’t belong here) [Environmental RMA]
- Environmental symbols like mascots and Illini music, chief dances, etc. [Environmental RMA]

Campus Climate and BIPOC Students’ Sense of “Not Belonging”

- 2 out of 3 students of color who responded to the 2011-2012 online survey have experienced harassment (emotional, verbal or physical) on campus because of race.
- 60% of students of color reported experiencing racism on campus.
- 59% of students of color reported having stereotypes made about them in the classroom because of race.
- 80% percent of students of color have felt that the campus is informally segregated based on race.

Doing the Hard Work of Building a Diverse and Inclusive Community

Faculty and Staff

- Give students power. Tell them it is ok to tell you when you said something that was offensive.
 - Possible Statement on Syllabus: “All students are encouraged to let me know if I say or do something that makes you feel uncomfortable at any point in this class. Please tell me in class or leave an anonymous note under my office door or in my mailbox.”
- If you witness an RMA, consider speaking up and not being a bystander. Conduct power analysis.
- Be aware of possible stereotypes that you may have about certain racial and ethnic groups. Student reported the following stereotypes: Asians are intellectually superior and good at math and science.

African Americans are academically unprepared and intellectually inferior. African Americans and Latino/as are admitted because of their race and not their merit/genius.

- Be aware of subtle messages that you give students around “belonging” in the department.
- Be aware of signs of stress and try to address issues early before escalates, know reporting procedures.
- Different Microaggressions (e.g., physical disabilities, sexual orientation, etc.) & inclusive language
 - Gender neutral terms – “you guys” vs. “you all or everyone” and “girlfriend” vs. “partner”
 - Mental Health as a Disease – “committed suicide” vs. “died of depression”

Students

- Try to address issues when they first start to happen (see interrupting microaggression handout).
- If you witness an RMA, consider speaking up and not being a bystander. Conduct power analysis.
- Be aware of your stress and know reporting procedures.
- Find safe spaces: clubs, organizations, classes, a network of friends and family members where you can talk about experiences.
- Decide ahead of time what may say when someone comments about why they feel you are at university let them know your gifts and talents or not.
- See if you can do research on this issue. We are developing a RMA phone app and would like to test it.

Administration

- Require at least one question about racial climate in the classroom or general sense of belonging on ICES forms. Aggregate the data and make a yearly report to the campus.
- Add several questions about campus racial climate on student, faculty and staff exit surveys. Aggregate the data and make a yearly report to the campus.
- Create a supportive mechanism for students to report perceived racial microaggressions that does not create more stress for the student, but constitutes a record of the campus environment. Identify steps in the process and a timeline for when students will get a response from administration. Aggregate the data and make a yearly report to the campus.
- Paradigm shift to significantly decrease the weight placed on ACT/SAT/GRE as factors in admittance.
- Monitor majors with very low students of color each year and provide support to help them increase their numbers. Provide proper support for freshmen students of color as they transition to college.
- Conduct a racial disparity study of campus student discipline.
- Foster the land-grant mission by supporting Project 1,000 to address low enrolment for underrepresented groups with particular attention to the South and West side of Chicago and the North end in Champaign.
- Closely monitor the changes in the Cultural Studies General Education requirement that students take a U.S. people of color cultural course to ensure course content is appropriate.
- Fundamentally change the culture of the university!

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1) Use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology:

These types of microaggressions occur when someone uses disparaging heterosexist or transphobic language towards, or about, LGBTQ persons. For me, it is anytime someone says “That’s so gay” and “No homo” in my presence; for my transgender friends, it could be anytime someone says “tranny”, “she-male”, or other derogatory terms. In hip hop, it is common for rappers to unapologetically use the word “faggot”, which then gives permission for kids to use the term unapologetically in everyday life. Maybe this is why 9 out of 10 LGBTQ high school students report experiencing harassment at school and why 2/3 of them say they feel unsafe (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2010).

2) Endorsement of heteronormative culture and behaviors:

These kinds of microaggressions take place when an LGBTQ person is assumed to be heterosexual, or when they are encouraged to act in gender-conforming ways. I know that I’ve been told that I shouldn’t be so flamboyant or that I should act “more masculine”. As a child, my family forced me to play sports, yet sighed when I played with Barbie. As a young adult, when someone asked me “if I had a girlfriend” or “a wife or kids”, they were essentially telling me that they expected me to be heterosexual. Heterosexuals don’t realize that it is common for them to assume someone is straight, unless proven otherwise.

3) Assumption of universal LGBTQ experience:

These sorts of microaggressions transpire when heterosexual people assume that all LGBTQ persons are the same. For instance, sometimes, people tell me I’m not “a typical gay guy” because of some stereotype I don’t fulfill; other times, people assume that I would automatically get along with another gay guy simply

because we are attracted to the same gender. Lesbian women have reported that people presume that they should all be masculine, while bisexual people have reported that they are often stereotyped as being “confused” (Nadal, Issa, et al., 2011). Many transgender women have reported being arrested and falsely accused of being sex workers (Nadal et al., 2012), demonstrating that these biases and microaggressions could even have legal implications.

4) Discomfort or disapproval of LGBTQ experience:

These types of microaggressions include instances when LGBTQ people are treated with awkwardness, condemnation, or both. This takes place any time a couple looks at my fiancée and me in disgust as we hold hands in public. It also occurs when people proclaim that my sexual orientation is “an abomination” or that a transgender person’s gender identity is “unnatural.” One recent example of this in the media is the story of a [transgender scientist](#) who was outed and ridiculed for her gender identity by a journalist. While the article was supposed to focus on one of her inventions, the writer chose to instead focus the article on her gender identity. While instances like this may occur for many LGBTQ people, this story is especially tragic because the transgender woman who was targeted eventually committed suicide.

5) Assumption of sexual pathology or abnormality:

These microaggressions come about when heterosexual people consider LGBTQ people to be sexual deviants or overly sexual. One example of this on a systemic level is the [federal ban](#) for any man who has had sex with another man to donate blood. So even if a man is HIV-negative and has been in a monogamous relationship all of his life, he is considered to be at risk and therefore an ineligible donor. In the media, an example includes one time when [Paris Hilton](#) said that gay men are “disgusting” and “probably have AIDS” or recently when [The Bachelor](#) said that gay people were “more ‘pervert’ in a sense.” In everyday life, a common occurrence is when people assume that LGBTQ people would be child molesters and are wary about LGBTQ teachers or

babysitters. Anytime that any straight man assumes that I would hit on them, not only are they mistakenly flattering themselves, they are communicating that they think that all gay men can't keep their hands to themselves.

6) Denial of bodily privacy:

These kinds of microaggressions occur toward transgender people primarily and include interactions in which others feel entitled or comfortable to objectify transgender bodies. For instance, when [Katie Couric](#) recently asked Carmen Carrera about her genitals, she inappropriately and invasively asked a question that would never been asked toward a cisgender person (i.e., a person whose gender identity matches their birth sex). How would you feel if someone asked you about your genitalia on national television?

Why does this matter?

All of these microaggressions have a significant impact on people's lives. While some of these experiences may seem brief and harmless, **many studies have found that the more that people experience microaggressions, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression, psychological distress, and even physical health issues.** For instance, I recently published a study that found that the more racial microaggressions that people of color experience, the more likely they are to also report depressive symptoms and a negative view of the world (Nadal et al., 2014). In another study, LGBTQ participants described that when they experienced microaggressions, they felt depressed, anxious, and even traumatized (Nadal, Wong, et al., 2011). Furthermore, given that LGBTQ youth are known to have a higher prevalence of substance abuse, homelessness, and suicide (see Nadal, 2013 for a review), it is even more important for us to try to minimize microaggressions and make the world a better place for them.

Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions

MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLE AND THEME	THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION EXAMPLE	COMMUNICATION APPROACH
<p>Alien in One's Own Land To a Latino American: "Where are you from?"</p> <p>Ascription of Intelligence To an Asian person, "You're all good in math, can you help me with this problem?"</p> <p>Color Blindness "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>INQUIRE 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. KEY PHRASES: "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>Myth of Meritocracy "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."</p> <p>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles 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>PARAPHRASE/REFLECT 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. KEY PHRASES: "So, it sounds like you think..." "You're saying... You believe..."</p>
<p>Second-Class Citizen You notice that your female colleague is being frequently interrupted during a committee meeting.</p> <p>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles 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>REFRAME Create a different way to look at a situation. KEY PHRASES: "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>Second-Class Citizen Saying "You people..."</p> <p>Use of Heterosexist Language 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>USE IMPACT AND "I" STATEMENTS 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. KEY PHRASES: "I felt _____ (feelings) when you said or did _____ (comment or behavior), and it _____ (describe the impact on you)."</p>
<p>Second-Class Citizen 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>USE PREFERENCE STATEMENTS Clearly communicating one's preferences rather than stating them as demands or having others guess what is needed. KEY PHRASES: "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*, 5th Edition, pp. 116-117. LeBaron, M. (2008). "The Open Question," in Armster, M. and Amstutz, L., (Eds.), *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*, 5th 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.

Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions

MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLE AND THEME	THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION EXAMPLE	COMMUNICATION APPROACH
<p>Color Blindness “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</p> <p>Myth of Meritocracy “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>RE-DIRECT 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>KEY PHRASES: “Let’s shift the conversation...” “Let’s open up this question to others....”</p>
<p>Myth of Meritocracy 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>Second-Class Citizen 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>USE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS 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>KEY PHRASES: “What would allow you...” “What could you do differently....” “What would happen if you considered the impact on...”</p>
<p>Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping 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>REVISIT 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>KEY PHRASES: “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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